

SHORT STORY
WRITING

for

PROFIT

By MICHAEL JOSEPH

With a Foreword by

STACY AUMONIER



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FOREWORD

To talk shop is a justifiable and lovable trait in human nature.

I have often noticed that when authors break loose, that is to say when they escape from their colleagues, and flash their personalities at dinner parties and tea-fights, they invariably talk about Smollett and Fielding, Freud and Froissart, and art, and art, and ART. But when they are together, with no visitors present, they talk about contracts and agents, and the best way to squeeze a bit more out of editors and publishers. All of which is very nice and as it should be.

It is pleasant, therefore, to be associated with a book that is frankly designed to appeal to the young literary aspirant about to open his shop. It is an exciting moment. What goods shall I sell? How shall I dress the window? Shall I keep a cash register or a clerk? What is the best way to get customers?

It is specially pleasant to discuss the questions affecting the short story shop, because the art of writing short stories is probably the only art in which the demand is far greater than the supply. This does not mean that editors do not have sufficient stories submitted to them. They are deluged. But unfortunately barely one-tenth of that deluge is in any way worth serious consideration. I suspect that Michael Joseph's motive in writing this admirable and helpful book is to raise the percentage from ten to say twenty-five per cent. It can be done, and may serve a very useful

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purpose. Mr. Joseph has had a wide experience and a very special insight into both the artistic and commercial aspect of the short story. He has made a careful study of authors, of plots, themes and construction, and editors' whimsies. He has put the working mind of the short story writer in a crucible, and has set down the record of his analysis for the benefit of all who may desire to have it. Beyond this, however, I am quite sure that he is not sufficiently sanguine for a moment to imagine that the study and close application to the tenets laid down in his book are going to produce a great story writer, because the trouble is that when the professors and the schoolmen have analyzed a proposition to shreds, and have mutually agreed about the exact interpretation of a phrase, and when the last "t" has been crossed, and the last "i" dotted, and we all think it is finished and go home to tea, some gink comes along and does everything exactly opposite to what has been taught, and yet he gets away with the goods. (I make no apologies; this can only be expressed in Americanese.) And yet this does not follow that the professors and the schoolmen are wrong. The difficulty is to strike the happy application of acquired experience to one's own peculiar twists of personality.

In England we hear some, but not very much, talk about style in literature. Style is only taken seriously as affecting clothes and cricket—particularly cricket. Style in cricket is almost an English sacrosanct tradition, and yet one day someone like G. L. Jessop comes along, plays with a crooked bat, crouches, stands in front of his wicket, and knocks up a century against the Australians at Lord's in a test match. Even then it does not follow that the stylists are wrong. Jessop applies what he has learnt to the de-

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mands of his individual genius. The traditional style may still be sounder as a means of training the young.

And so it must be with the writing of short stories. They are not written out of the blue, and Michael Joseph has some stimulating and suggestive things to say with regard to the origin of ideas and how they may be worked.

Up to a certain point everything may be taught. A gifted pianoforte professor can teach a pupil not only to play correctly, to phrase correctly, but even to produce a *good quality of tone*. And there the matter ends. If the pupil has genius he will go further. If he has not, he will stop where the professor leaves him.

I am quite convinced that up to this point a pupil of any intelligence can be taught to write a short story. I once heard an eminent surgeon say: "I cannot think how anyone can write a story. It's a perfect nightmare to me. I shouldn't know even how to *begin*." I italicize "*begin*," because that is rather the whole point. You certainly have to begin. But if you analyze the mental processes that go to the making of a short story you quickly realize that you have to finish before you begin. This is a point that Mr. Joseph makes quite clear. I shouldn't know how to begin an operation for appendicitis, but my good surgeon rather overlooks the fact that he has finished his operation for appendicitis (mentally) before he has begun it. This is a point which cannot be stressed too much—that a short story must be finished before it is begun. In other words that you must think it all out clearly and in detail before you begin to write. In a novel it is not so necessary, because you may wander off and enjoy yourself and come back; but in the short story you have to use the utmost economy and eliminate all superfluous matter. I am sure that the

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informative side of Mr. Joseph's book regarding the commercial handling of short stories will be very welcome to younger writers who have little experience. The conditions which govern the professional career of the author have changed astoundingly during the last decade. Let us consider the two cases of Charles Dickens and H. G. Wells. Please understand that I am making no artistic comparisons. I am merely regarding them as two highly successful literary shopkeepers in their respective day. In Dickens' time he had his novels published in book form and some of them were serialized, and there from a business point of view the matter ended. But to be as successful as H. G. Wells must be a perfect nightmare. When he writes a novel he has to consider not only the disposal of the English book rights and the American book rights, but the English serial rights, and the American serial rights, and the translation rights in a dozen or more foreign countries. He has also to consider the film rights, and whether the novel would be adaptable as a play. And it looks as though quite soon we shall have some further complications with broadcasting or wireless rights. It sounds enormously lucrative, but on the other hand he has to pay American income tax, English income tax, and supertax, and then either a literary agent or a highly competent secretary. A friend of mine who wrote two best-sellers recently told me that he gets just eight shillings in the pound on what he earns! In some ways Dickens was better off, especially when we consider that a pound in his day went about as far as ten now.

But certainly at the present day the literary shop is more exciting. Every day brings new developments, new customers, new disappointments, and new hopes. Anyone who

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desires to live a comfortable life, with an assured income, and no worries, is advised not to keep a shop — not even a literary shop. But for him or her who is prepared to take the rough with the smooth, and to enjoy risks, and to endure discouragements, it is not a bad old shop. There are days when the weather is dull and overcast, and customers few and far between, and surly in their demeanor. You feel inclined to put up the shutters, and run away and leave it, and never come back. But wait awhile. There dawns a day when the sun comes out, and you suddenly think how attractive your goods look in the window, and customers are jolly and generous. They pat you on the back, and even pay for things in advance, and you are awfully pleased with yourself. You forget about the dull days. You even persuade yourself — quite unreasonably — that the dull days cannot return, because you are living them, and sunshine is a more vital thing than mist.

STACY AUMONIER.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THIS little book is meant to appeal to those who feel the need of a practical guide to short story writing.

The majority of the authors quoted have been chosen as good working models for the writer who is anxious to produce a saleable story; and on that account it has been necessary to omit reference to writers of the calibre of Tchegov, Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, Walter de la Mare, Aldous Huxley, G. B. Stern, May Sinclair, Maurice Baring, and Elizabeth Bibesco, although they are playing an important part in the development of the modern short story. The ultra-modern conception of the short story as a vehicle for brilliant writing will not help the would-be contributor to the magazines.

In an endeavor to help the beginner I have tried to make clear certain general principles of short story writing in a simple, even elementary way, realizing, as I hope all young writers will realize, that the real art of story writing can never be taught. Individuality of thought and expression cannot be acquired by learning. But I do feel that at least in a negative way much can be done to remove the more obvious blemishes of amateur efforts. Even if this book serves only the purpose of stimulating interest in the work of certain modern writers of the short story it may perhaps be regarded as a useful stepping-stone.

I claim no special qualification for a book on the short story except a practical experience of what the amateur really does require in the way of instruction and advice.

Introductory Note

The practised writer's point of view is more or less useless to the beginner. The unkind saying, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach," is my only other justification for producing a book whose sole aim is to help the unknown and aspiring writer.

MICHAEL JOSEPH.

SHORT STORY WRITING
FOR PROFIT

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CHAPTER I

THE MAGAZINE SHORT STORY

THE short story used to be described as the Cinderella of English literature. Fashions in fiction come and go, and there are signs that the prejudice against the short story, in book form, at any rate, is fast dwindling away. As a literary form the short story (except for a brief period in the 'nineties) has never really flourished in the past. Perhaps as Mr. Arthur Waugh has said:

“for some not altogether inexplicable reason, it seems to be generally alien to the English literary temperament. . . . For the very qualities which constitute the essence of the short story — restraint, austerity, selection, the prevailing and controlling moral idea — for these the typically impetuous and fecund English temperament has neither the time nor the disposition. The short story is an essay in discipline and interpretation, in which everything depends upon construction, the delicate choice and arrangement of effects, the gradual development and revelation of the idea —

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in short, upon artistry and soul. And it is a plain fact that the average English novelist cannot take his art seriously enough to master the methods of elimination and production essential to the writing of a satisfactory short story."

Yet when Kipling astonished everybody in the "'eighties" with a succession of brilliant short stories, he set a literary fashion which for the next decade produced a large and flourishing crop of short stories. The boom in the "'nineties" resulted in a surfeit.

"Scarcely an author of any repute or no repute," says Rebecca West, "but wrote and published short stories. The better periodicals of the period, such as *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, as well as the worse, were full of them."

Fortunately, not all of these were collected and published in book form or the short story might have received a blow from which it would have been slow to recover. The pendulum of public taste then began to swing in the opposite direction, and during the past twenty years publishers have generally fought very shy of the volume of collected short stories.

Today, however, it is a significant fact that publishers are beginning to look with a more favorable eye on short stories. Is it the old story of supply and demand? Or is it because the present day

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standard of the short story justifies an offering to the public at \$2.00 a volume? With the demand for volumes of short stories this little book is not concerned. Good stories are worthy of the honor of permanent form. The wide editorial market is the field that engages our attention.

I have never been able to understand the people who affect to despise "magazine stories." When some achieve the dignity of book form, there is always an unkind critic to write disparagingly of "fugitive fiction." The fact remains that there is a flourishing market for readable short stories; the public demand entertaining fiction and are prepared to pay every month to get it. It is easy enough to say that public taste is not very high from an artistic point of view — but does that matter? The man who contributes short stories to the magazines is every whit as useful a member of society as the man who manufactures furniture or cheap jewelry, or who provides many of the plays that people pay to go and see. The "highbrow" method of trying to educate public taste by producing (usually at some hypnotized patron's expense) a play or book that is miles above the public's heads is simply a waste of time.

In fiction there are two schools of thought. Henry James held that the art of fiction was to represent

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life. On the other hand Alphonse Daudet asserted that its primary object was to entertain. Between these two points of view there is really a wide gulf. The demand for fiction that simply entertains is by far greater than the demand for fiction of the Henry James standard; and it is obviously with the former that a book on short story writing for profit will have to deal. There is no reason to scorn the world of so-called "highbrows," which is, after all, entertainment of a higher standard, appealing to a cultured minority. In any artistic or literary comparison popular fiction is bound to suffer, but taking a wide view even the most bitter critic must admit that popular fiction serves a wholesome and altogether worthy purpose. It brings pleasure and comfort into countless thousands of lives. No one need be ashamed of producing fiction that entertains.

Yet the magazines — and the public — do not get the short stories they deserve. Many a story gets sent down to the printers because there is nothing better to put in. The trouble is that the ambitious young writer does not know where to begin. And it says much for the enterprise and imagination of our new writers that a respectable number of good short stories appear in print every month. This number could be considerably increased, and it is hoped that this little book will prove something of a practical

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help to all who wish to become contributors to the fiction magazines.

The magazine short story is one of the most striking developments of modern journalism. A few years ago it was in the experimental stage, making spasmodic and rather apologetic appearances in the more serious magazines. However distant the origin of the short story (and it claims descent from parables of Biblical days and tales told at Arab camp-fires) its rapid growth and expansion are an entirely modern development. The fiction magazine which contains from half-a-dozen to twenty complete stories is now an established institution. A later chapter deals comprehensively with the markets awaiting the writer's work. Our first consideration is a clear understanding of the general aim of the short story.

Sir Walter Besant's definition, which applies to fiction generally, is worth quoting at this point:

“The Art of Fiction requires first of all the power of description, truth and fidelity, observation, selection, clearness of conception and outline, dramatic grouping, directness of purpose, a profound belief on the part of the story-teller in the reality of his story, and beauty of workmanship.”

Lest this rather formidable statement discourage the beginner, it is as well to point out that a magazine

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story may lamentably fail to reach this high standard and yet find its way into print.

What is required for a magazine short story?

To understand the requirements of short story writing and the rules which govern the production of a saleable short story a preliminary comparison between the novel and the short story is illuminating.

A short story is *not* in any respect a condensed novel. The novel is as different from the short story as a canvas oil painting is from a miniature portrait. Each medium demands its own treatment. The confusion between the two forms of expression is probably due to the fact that many successful novelists produce short stories with equal facility (although not always with equal felicity). The reverse process — the story writer turned novelist — is also common enough, but this is frequently due to the sense of confidence acquired and an ambition to work on the broader canvas.

But although established authors use the two forms, the beginner must realize that the technique of each is absolutely individual.

The essential difference between the short story and the novel is this: the short story aims at a singleness of impression which the novel rarely can produce. There should be one outstanding “point” in a short story: one central incident, or climax, to which

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everything else in the story is strictly subordinate. (I exclude the comparatively rare short story of character in which characterization predominates and refer to the short story of action, in which the movement of events, or plot, is the chief interest.) Everything in the short story must lead up to just that one point which lands on the target of the reader's receptive consciousness. The Greeks called it the "catastrophe."

Take, for instance, O. Henry's story *Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen*.

"For the last nine years Stuffy Pete, an old tramp, has been met by an old gentleman and taken out to dinner. Today he has already been treated to an enormous meal by two old ladies. Force of habit brings him to the annual trysting place. The old gentleman arrives, goes through the time-honored ceremony of invitation, and carries off Stuffy Pete to the restaurant. Stuffy Pete has not the heart to disappoint the old gentleman and by prodigious effort chokes down a second enormous dinner. When the meal is finished the old gentleman and Stuffy Pete part at the door. When Stuffy Pete is outside he collapses. He is taken to hospital. They are puzzled to know what is the matter with him.

"And lo! An hour later an ambulance brought the old gentleman. And they laid him on another bed and spoke of appendicitis, for he looked good for the bill. But pretty soon one of the young doctors met

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one of the young nurses whose eyes he liked, and stopped to chat with her about the cases. ‘That nice old gentleman over there now,’ he said, ‘you wouldn’t think that was a case of almost starvation. Proud old family, I guess. He told me he hadn’t eaten a thing for three days.’ ”

The “point” in the story is, of course, the discovery that the old gentleman was starving. O. Henry excels in the “surprise-ending” short story, and this is a typical O. Henry *dénouement* which concentrates in a few simple words at the end the massed-up irony of the whole story.

This singleness or unity of impression is vital to the success of a short story. Once the impression is delivered the story is all over. That is why the desired effect is nearly always produced in the climax at the end. A good test of the efficacy of the climax is to ask oneself whether it could be worked in earlier in the story. If so, there is something radically wrong with it.

In Andrew Soutar’s story, *The Way you look at Things*, which is more a study of character than a plot story, you have a clever word-picture of a man blinded in the War who has returned to his native village embittered and in despair. He meets his old Colonel who takes him in hand, guides him about the countryside, stimulating his interest in all the things

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he can no longer see. The Colonel is a wonderful tonic; his cheery optimism reconciles his blind companion to the new order of things and completely changes his outlook. When at last he has a real grip on happiness and contentment of spirit that he thought completely lost to him, and is left in the company of the girl who had cared for him all along in spite of his affliction, he discovers that *the old Colonel, too, is blind*.

Obviously this climax must come in the last few words. It could not be revealed earlier, and anything after it is not only superfluous but fatal.

This essential "point" must be the inspiration of the story; incident and characters can be dovetailed in to assist the general accumulative effect as required; but while the process of selection and rejection goes on in the writer's mind the "point" of the story must be installed on a lofty mental pedestal and never lost sight of.

What is the length of a short story? This is a point on which it is impossible to legislate with finality.

Some popular magazines publish so-called "long complete novels"; in reality novelettes, ranging in length from 12,000 to 30,000 words. Where, then, does the short story end and the novel begin? The average full-length novel contains about 80,000

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words. These novelettes of 20,000 or 30,000 words are, as a rule, condensed novels — not long short stories. The average magazine short story is from 2,500 to 8,000 words long. From the average editor's point of view 3,000 to 4,000 words is a convenient length. The difference between the short story and the novel is, as a matter of fact, a difference of kind, not of length.

The mechanism of the short story is much simpler than that of the novel. There is no room for subplots, irrelevant characters or episodes, no scope for detail that does not bear directly on the single, main issue of the story. Every sentence must be examined, consciously or unconsciously, to see whether it is necessary to the story's development. Inexperienced writers have a curious reluctance to delete anything once it is written, particularly if some turn of phrase happens to please them. This is a bad habit which must be ruthlessly eradicated. The test to apply to any word, sentence, or paragraph is: "Is this essential to the story as a whole? How does this help the unfolding of the narrative? What is its definite purpose?" In any instance where it appears that dispensing with the passage in question will not materially affect the story, then is the time to apply the sub-editor's traditional maxim: "When in doubt, have it out!"

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Before going on to deal in detail with important features of short story writing, such as plot, dialogue, characterization, style, and so on, I propose to refer briefly to an aspect of fiction of which the importance is not fully realized. It is a general principle of all fiction. Practised writers observe it unconsciously, but the amateur does not always realize its great importance. The illusion of *reality* is the foundation of successful fiction.

To understand the significance of this "illusion" think for a moment of the mental process you undergo when you begin to read a story. You unconsciously prepare yourself for immersion in another world. (Herein, in fact, lies the secret of the great attraction of fiction and drama for humanity.) This preparation is caused by an elemental desire to enjoy and appreciate the fictitious story to be unfolded before you. Vicariously you enter into the story, possibly as a protagonist. It is because the vast majority of readers — especially women — subconsciously identify themselves with the leading character, usually the heroine of a story, that tales of triumph over adversity, of love conquering all, of ambitions realized and enemies thwarted, are so widely popular. In this way fiction — and as a parallel instance, the drama — represents an escape from the often harsh realities of life. The roseate

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world of fiction is a refuge for the majority of us who try in this subconscious way to forget the disappointments and delusions of real life. Perhaps this explains the popularity of stories with happy endings.

To satisfy the reader's craving, to induce him or her to forget their real existence and enter into the special little world created by your story, you must at all costs preserve the illusion. So-called realism in fiction is not really realism at all. It is a special brand of realism—for use in fiction only. Stories “just like real life” are nothing of the kind. Life is dull and monotonous; a faithful picture of real life would be the same. Think what it would mean to reproduce in writing the story of a man's life for a day only! All the detail, the absolutely irrelevant happenings, the appallingly uninteresting routine of everyone's daily life presented in detailed outline!

Ordinary thoughts or conversation, for instance, cannot be transferred straight from real life to print. It would read like gibberish. The normal conversation of real life, if reproduced faithfully in print, would not strike the reader as normal. In the same way description, narrative, the whole process of telling a story must be subject to a kind of refining process.

All art is a continuous process of selection and adjustment. In fiction the details of the picture are

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not painted in but left to the imagination of the reader. It is important to realize that the reader is willing to coöperate with the writer by bringing his imagination to bear on the story and filling in the inevitable gaps.

The author, then, starts with this advantage, that the reader is ready to meet him half-way, so to speak. The reader says, in effect: "I am willing, even anxious, to believe in the existence of your characters and the happenings of your story; only by this means shall I be able to derive enjoyment from it."

This places an important obligation on the writer. If through bad judgment or clumsy craftsmanship he strikes a false note, the reader cannot be expected to go on believing in the story. The illusion suffers to such an extent that the reader loses patience and, ceasing to enjoy the story, puts it down. It must be remembered that the average reader will accept the existence of the most widely improbable facts and people if necessary to the story and provided they are presented with sufficient skill. H. de Vere Stacpoole's novel *The Man Who Lost Himself* and H. G. Wells's famous romances contain the most incredible plots and incidents but have given entertainment to thousands of readers. For the sake of enjoying a story the reader will accept any hypothesis, however fantastic.

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The power of suggestion in fiction is of supreme importance. Take the description of the Wellsian "Time Machine" in the romance of that title:

"The thing the Time Traveller held in his hand was a glittering metallic framework scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made. There was ivory in it, and some transparent crystalline substance . . .

* * * * *

" 'This little affair,' said the Time Traveller, resting his elbows on the table, and pressing his hands together above the apparatus, 'is only a model. It is my plan for a machine to travel through time. You will notice that it looks singularly askew and that there is an odd twinkling appearance about this bar, as though it were in some way unreal.' He pointed to the part with his finger. 'Also, here is one little white lever, and here is another.'

"The medical man got up out of his chair and peered into the thing. 'It's beautifully made,' he said.

* * * * *

"In the laboratory we beheld a larger edition of the little mechanism which we had seen vanish from before our eyes. Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. The thing was generally complete, but the twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench beside

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some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be."

That is all, but it is enough.

Such an insinuating method is infinitely more effective than any amount of detailed description. In fact the latter would probably confuse the reader, who is not so much anxious to visualize the machine as to accept the hypothesis of its invention and manufacture and get on with the story.

Take Gilbert Frankau's description of a storm at sea:

"He saw the rails dip — saw water rise up over them, a solid wall of it, thick turquoise glass, white-spotted as if by a shower of stones; saw it stand straight up, smooth opaque window between deck and deck; stand quite still. This was death? . . . The blue wall tottered, fell back into the yellowy slather of sea."

This is what the author himself says of it:

"This particular little picture is a piece of real life as I saw it myself from the deck of a ship during a typhoon. The points to note are that the picture conveys not what actually happened but what appeared to happen. Any sailor will tell you that what actually must have happened was that the ship heeled right over into the water. Seen from the deck, however, it

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looked as though water came over the ship 'like a blue wall.' Nor did the blue wall really 'fall back.' What happened was that the ship recovered herself and stood on a more or less even keel. All the same, I feel that, to the average reader sitting safely in an armchair at home, the few lines of picturing give a far more realistic impression than would a long description of what actually happened."

Preserving the illusion, then, is one of the most decisive factors in successful fiction.

We can now go on to deal with what is probably the most vital element in the magazine short story, the Plot.

CHAPTER II

PLOT

“ IN the popular magazines,” says Arnold Bennett, “ ingenuity of plot is almost everything.”

The plot, or the outline of the actual story, is of supreme importance. Many a magazine story owes its publication almost entirely to an ingenious plot. Without a good plot the average amateur effort is doomed from the outset. There is, of course, a type of story which depends for its effect not so much on plot as on character or atmosphere; and a good study of character, particularly when it is the work of an author with a “ big ” name, is a common enough feature of our magazines. For the purpose of this chapter it is, however, sufficient to consider only the straightforward action story.

Originality of plot is an ideal not always realized in practice. The old saying, that there is nothing new under the sun, applies forcefully to fiction. In the strict sense of the word originality is practically non-existent. Ingenuity, cleverness, novelty, fertility of invention, yes, but not real originality. Most magazine stories are variations on very ancient themes. There are many easily recognizable types of plot:

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the eternal triangle (the man and wife and the other man or woman), the mystery plot, the story of the coward who is really a hero all the time, plots with sacrifice as the central motive, plots with a moral, in which villainy is overthrown and virtue triumphant, the mistaken identity plot, the love story which ends with wedding bells, the "surprise" ending plot, and so on, familiar to every editor. But however hackneyed the theme, freshness of treatment will go a long way towards securing favorable consideration. An old plot treated from a new angle will satisfy most editorial requirements.

What is a plot? Definitions are proverbially dangerous, we know. But certainly a plot may be described as the outline of the story, the bare outline stripped of all description, characterization and dialogue. The plot should not be confused with what is often called the "theme." The central idea, the general inspiration of the story is the theme.

"A husband and wife, very hard up, but each anxious to make the other a present on the anniversary of their wedding day, resolve independently to sacrifice a precious private possession. The day comes, and the husband produces the combs he has bought for his wife's beautiful hair by the sale of his beloved fiddle, only to find that his wife has cut off and sold her hair to provide him with a new bow for his violin."*

* *The Gift of the Magi*.—O. Henry.

Plot

The central idea of this briefly expressed plot is the irony of sacrifice. The spirit of sacrifice permeates the story and thus forms the theme.

But the plot is something different from the theme. Theme is the more general term, plot has to fulfil a number of more or less definite requirements. Usually the theme is the first thing to suggest itself to the writer's mind, the plot deriving naturally from it.

A mere narrative is not a plot. As Edgar Allan Poe says:

“A mere succession of incidents will not constitute a plot. A plot, properly understood, is perfect only inasmuch as we shall find ourselves unable to detach from it or *disarrange* any single incident involved without *destruction* to the mass. This, we say, is the point of perfection — a point never yet attained, but not on that account unattainable. Practically we may consider a plot as of high excellence when no one of its component parts shall be susceptible of *removal* without detriment to the whole.”

The essential point of difference between plot and narrative lies in a feature of the former which may be called Complication (in the sense of crisis). In narrative, events are described in a straightforward manner, and usually in their natural sequence; in a plot the happenings are *complicated*. This device

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arouses the interest or curiosity of the reader and maintains it until the final *dénouement* (untying).

Not all short stories conform to this pattern; in fact, it cannot be too often emphasized that the art of short story writing admits of few dogmatic rules and regulations. It is an elastic medium of expression, and I am firmly convinced that more can be learned by an intelligent study of successful examples than by any other means. But first of all it is essential to understand the requirements of a good short story plot.

With this in view I recommend all young writers (by this I mean, of course, inexperienced writers) to start a Plot Book. This should be divided into two sections, containing in the first: analysis summaries of good short stories, and in the second, original plot summaries and outlines for personal use.

Analyzing and summarizing good plots is a most helpful literary exercise. Aim at putting on record in tabloid form any plot which strikes you as being exceptionally good. Plots of stories by well-known authors like O. Henry, W. W. Jacobs, Leonard Merrick, Stacy Aumonier, Gilbert Frankau, Arthur Morrison, Elinor Mordaunt, should be condensed into about 250-300 words and this brief outline, which may be jotted down in the form of notes if desired, committed to the Plot Book. Any current magazine

Plot

story with a striking plot may be similarly dealt with. To give a practical instance of what I mean, your Plot Book might contain something on these lines:

HOMeward BOUND, by Perceval Gibbon. A Tale of Tragic Vengeance.

Dan Goodwin, who has made good in Africa, is on the point of sailing for home. His wife, Incarnation, a beautiful primitive-natured girl, reluctantly hands him his coat and pocket-book, afraid that he may gamble with the money which the next morning is to pay for their passage. On his way to Mulligan's saloon Dan is sandbagged and robbed. Frantic, he enlists the help of a friend and embarks on a wild search for the man with an odd rubber-soled shoe whose footprint is his sole clue. At last after weary search they strike the man's trail in the sand, and corner him in his ramshackle house. They find the pocket-book empty. The thief swears there was "only twenty milreis" in it. To make him reveal where the £200 is hidden Dan threatens him with torture. The terrified wretch sticks to his story and Dan, infuriated at the thought of disappointing his beloved Incarnation, tortures him—to death. He goes home, inert with misery. Incarnation greets him, as a child rather frightened of being scolded. She produces two second-class passages, Beira to London, and then the rest of the money. Because he had assured her he would not play cards, she had taken out the money, leaving him only twenty milreis for drinks. "Only twenty milreis!"

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After a dozen or more stories have been thus condensed and recorded in the Plot Book, the requirements of a successful plot will gradually become apparent. It is both unnecessary and inadvisable to try and formulate any definite rules governing plot ideas. It is fairly safe to assert that fixed rules and definitions have seldom produced or assisted in the production of good plot ideas. Cut-and-dried formulæ are useless. Generally speaking, a good plot should be original, understandable, and convincing.

As a reader you realize the effect of a short story when you have finished it; you know whether you have enjoyed it or not, *i.e.*, whether as far as you are concerned, the story succeeds or fails. If a story strikes you as a good one it is an excellent plan to put into writing at once a paragraph or two to express the impression the story makes on you. From this the plot summary develops naturally. By this means you will be working backwards to the point from which the writer started. This analysis of other people's work will help you to gain further understanding of the requirements of the process and is invaluable.

Gradually a study of good short stories will enable you to realize all you want to know about plots. No great degree of intelligence is necessary to pick out and write down in your own words the

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plot of a story you have just read. At this point an indication of writers to study will probably be useful. First and foremost there is:

O. HENRY (William Sidney Porter)

The plots of this master-craftsman in the art of short story writing are an admirable model. Crisp, distinctive and interest-compelling all the time, his plots should be carefully studied and analyzed by all who are anxious to produce good stories. It is difficult to discriminate where the standard is so high, but the following stories are specially recommended for the purpose of plot study:

<i>Hearts and Crosses</i> ✓	<i>The Man Higher Up</i>
<i>The Ransom of Mack</i> ✓	<i>The Cop and the Anthem</i>
<i>The Handbook of Hymen</i> ✓	<i>"Next to Reading Matter"</i>
<i>The Reformation of Cal-</i>	<i>A Double-Dyed Deceiver</i>
<i>liope</i>	<i>A Retrieved Reformation</i>
<i>The Pimiento Pancakes</i> ✓	<i>Friends in San Rosario</i>
<i>The Passing of Black</i>	<i>Proof of the Pudding</i>
<i>Eagle</i>	<i>The Love Philtre of Ikey</i> ✓
<i>A Madison Square Ara-</i> ✓	<i>Schoenstein</i>
<i>bian Night</i>	<i>Jimmy Hayes and Muriel</i>
<i>The Count and the Wed-</i>	<i>The Ethics of Pig</i>
<i>ding Guest</i>	<i>The Badge of Policeman</i> ✓
<i>Jeff Peters as a Personal</i>	<i>O'Roon</i>
<i>Magnet</i>	

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LEONARD MERRICK

Guy de Maupassant is in many respects the prototype of Leonard Merrick, who is well-known as "the novelists' novelist." Merrick has written some of the best modern short stories. These are well worth reading from every point of view.

The plots of the following stories deserve special study:

A Very Good Thing for The Boom

the Girl

The Laurels and the Lady

Picq Plays the Hero

Frankenstein II

The Bishop's Comedy

With Intent to Defraud

A Flat to Spare

The Favourite Plot

H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

is better known as the author of *The Blue Lagoon* and other successful novels than as a writer of short stories, but his plots are so varied and striking that the student should certainly read:

Was She?

The Mystery of Captain

The Story of Gombi

Knott

*Did Kressler Kill His
Wife?*

STACY AUMONIER

whose two volumes of collected short stories have already established his reputation as a master of the short story, cannot be said to rely chiefly upon plot

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for the artistic success of his stories, but the student will derive much benefit from a study of his work, notably:

<i>The Landlord of the</i>	<i>The Golden Windmill</i>
<i>Love-a-Duck</i>	<i>The Brown Wallet</i>
<i>Little White Frock</i>	<i>The Octave of Jealousy</i>
<i>The Accident of Crime</i>	<i>Old Iron</i>
<i>The Great Unimpression-</i>	<i>A Source of Irritation</i>
<i>able</i>	<i>Them Others</i>

H. G. WELLS

His collection of stories *The Country of the Blind* contains some splendid models for the young writer. Nearly all his plots will repay analysis and study. Especially do they indicate how wide is the range of the short story. Admirable plots are to be found in the following stories:

<i>The Stolen Bacillus</i>	<i>The Magic Shop</i>
<i>The New Accelerator</i>	<i>The Obliterated Man</i>
<i>The Door in the Wall</i>	<i>A Slip under the Micro-</i>
<i>The Crystal Egg</i>	<i>scope</i>

Wells is a logical, clear-thinking writer, and his plots are the product of an exceptional imagination. Brilliantly conceived, and developed with uncanny skill, there is a clean-cut, vigorous quality about his short stories which it is impossible to imitate (with

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apologies to Max Beerbohm), but which is invaluable for purposes of study. His stories strike one as being literary *tours de force*. Few of us can reach the level of a writer like Wells, but just as playing tennis or bridge with the best players improves one's game, so does the study of the best writers' work enable one to visualize the art of writing properly, even if it only means catching a glimpse of the right kind of work.

Other writers whose plots are always worth examination are:

Perceval Gibbon

“ Sapper ”

Roland Pertwee

Frank Norris

John Galsworthy

Elinor Mordaunt

Douglas Newton

Arthur Morrison

May Edginton

F. Britten Austin

Jack London

Eden Phillpotts

No young writer should be discouraged through reading the work of celebrated authors. Dissatisfaction with one's own work is a healthy sign and should be expressed in an untiring and continuous effort to discover and remove faults and blemishes. “ I shall never be able to write like that,” is a despondent cry that comes to the lips of all ambitious writers at some time or other, but there is no need for depression. The standard of magazine fiction at any rate is not

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so high as all that. The satisfaction of seeing one's stories in print is within the reach of most of us.

The reading stage is never done with. Reading is food and drink to the writer, and his reading should cover a wide range. It is absurd to despise magazine fiction. From a practical point of view it is useful to be able to write a magazine story, and grateful and comforting in these hard times to receive the editor's check. Surely it is sound policy to keep in close touch with the markets you intend to approach. Therefore read, and go on reading as much as you can, both high-class stories and magazine fiction as well.

The next step is finding plots for oneself.

This is not so difficult as is sometimes supposed. Often young writers have said to me despairingly: "I don't get any inspiration. How am I going to find a good plot without inspiration?"

This "inspiration" fallacy is responsible for colossal damage to literary ambition. An old machine-gun maxim is "Success is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration."

It can be usefully applied to writing.

The most fruitful source of inspiration is probably the newspaper. Under the matter-of-fact surface of police court and county court proceedings the drama of humanity in all its aspects is revealed daily to any

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observant eye. Newspaper paragraphs often contain the germ of an idea. It is this germ you want. Adapt it, modify it, develop it, chew it over in your mind and your plot presently begins to formulate.

“One gets ideas in all sorts of ways,” Elinor Mordaunt once told me. “Reading the papers, particularly the Sunday papers; books of travels; books on insanity or criminology; scientific books: once get bitten with the love of story writing, and it crops up in everything.”

You read perhaps of a railway strike with its consequent hold-up of vital foodstuffs, milk and so on. Here is your “germ.” Your mind goes over the ground and considers the possibilities. The first thing that suggests itself is perhaps the family of one of the strikers. The wife an invalid, maybe — or a child’s chance of life may depend on fresh milk supply. The “point” of your story at once makes itself manifest. The striker triumphs; the child dies. You consider carefully the different aspects of the story. Milk? Rather crude, perhaps. Substitutes could probably be secured somehow. Then why a railway strike? Let’s have some other form of strike. The mind, continuing to explore, at last alights on a satisfactory theme. The story begins to unfold itself convincingly in your mind’s eye:

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A working electrician's child lies dangerously ill. The doctor tells the poor mother that the crisis will come in about three days. The man, thinking it safe to leave them, goes to a labor union meeting. But that night the baby is choking. A friend goes for the doctor. "It's all right," he reassures her. "Just a slight operation and all will be well. Don't worry: the crisis has come a little sooner than I expected, that's all." The doctor moves the single electric light over the bed and begins to sterilize his instruments, the mother standing beside him. He bends over the child and makes an incision, then another. Suddenly — darkness! The light has gone out. "Great God!" he cries, "why did you turn out the light?" "I didn't," comes from the darkness. They turn frantically to the switch — it is useless. At last with groping fingers a candle is found. Too late! The baby is dead. A noise floats to their ears from the streets below: the tramp of feet, the Marseillaise. The door opens. The husband stands triumphant before them. "Victory!" he cries. "We've won! There's not an electric light burning in all Paris tonight."*

And all this may spring from a prosaic newspaper report! This is where your Plot Book sees active service. Jot down in it any striking incident or situation that may work up into a good short story. The actual facts may be useless as they stand, but if you set your imagination to work an adjustment of the

* From a story by George Jean Nathan in the *Associated Sunday Magazine*, U. S. A.

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situation or an adaptation of the incident will just do the trick.

In this way all sorts of fascinating possibilities present themselves. Personal experiences may be pressed into service. Nothing is too small or too insignificant; a milk can seen on a doorstep in the early morning, a horse struggling under a heavy load, a woman coming out of a lawyer's office, sobbing, a suburban exchange of old clothes for a plant, a borrowed book with a letter left in it — all these seemingly trivial details may ultimately provide the material for a splendid plot. *The Eight Wonder*, by A. S. M. Hutchinson, probably owes its inspiration to a cigarette picture.

“A scientist once told me,” wrote Elinor Mor-daunt, “that if it were possible to bring cold to a certain point below freezing, I believe he called it the absolute zero, anything affected by it would absolutely disappear. Shut a man in an ice-room with such a temperature and there would not be so much as a button left to tell the tale. . . . ‘What a plot for a murder story!’ That was my one thought.”

One story frequently suggests another. This is particularly true of film stories. Perhaps the atmosphere of the cinema, where the eyes concentrate on transmitting the story to the brain and the senses are soothed (sometimes) by music, encourages the brain

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to go exploring for itself. The actors are silent; there are no voices to interrupt a train of thought. I heartily recommend the cinema as a stimulator of plot ideas.

Searching for plots is a pastime which ultimately becomes an ingrained habit. It is, moreover, an entertaining mental exercise, and the more you practise the better you become at it. The imagination seems to thrive on its own ingenuity.

It is difficult to avoid the hackneyed plot and still more difficult to advise what to avoid, but as a rough-and-ready rule editors do not like plots based on:

- (1) Mistaken Identity.
- (2) Sacrifice for Love's Sake.
- (3) The eternal triangle plot (two men and one woman or two women and one man).
- (4) The hero who sets out to make a fortune and comes back in the last line to marry the girl who has waited for him, or the poor boy whose industry wins him the hand of his employer's daughter.
- (5) The hero (!) who unwittingly offends his new employer or future father-in-law.

Yet, as I have said, the most hackneyed theme or plot may be used provided the treatment is original. These ancient plots are like diamonds cut with many facets. The whole appearance may be different if a

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new facet or aspect be presented to the reader. And, of course, the editor's point of view is his readers' point of view. He is paid to interpret what his readers want.

Short stories with a religious or political bias should be carefully avoided. Fiction editors will never risk the publication of a story which might cause offence to any section of their public — however small. A story with an improper theme is similarly offensive.

The magazine story should not be a vehicle for personal opinions, prejudices, and only rarely for philosophy.

It is often difficult to decide what to work on and what to reject in one's plot for short stories. Although, as Elinor Mordaunt says, you should "write stories without ceasing if you want to succeed, sparing nothing in the way of trouble, grudging nothing in the way of mental outlay," it is not easy to discriminate between ideas for plots.

What you may think "a fine idea" for a story may peter out in the most disappointing way when you start to work it out in pen and ink. The temptation to begin at once on "a fine idea" is often fatal.

"Most writers of experience," wrote the literary critic of the *London Weekly Dispatch*, "especially those engaged in manufacturing short stories that are

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not utterly ephemeral and conventional, know that there is nothing they must be more wary of than 'the fine idea.' More often than not this attractive and intriguing visitor from the unknown is a double-dyed traitor sent to waste the time and energy of the poor author, to render him bad-tempered, and to lure him like a will-o'-wisp into a literary morass.

"In other words, 'the fine idea' has a fatal habit of proving abortive when it is called upon to produce a fine story. It is discovered to lead either nowhere at all or to some quite unsatisfactory result, very different from the original expectation.

"The trouble is that the misguided author does not find out how he has been fooled till he has spent enormous trouble over something that was doomed from the start to be a failure.

"The note-books of professional story-tellers are filled with 'fine ideas.' They all get them. The more optimistic sit down to write at once under the spell, and in nine cases out of ten suffer disappointment.

"The knowing ones merely jot 'the fine idea' down in their note-books and leave it there along with its brethren until its pristine glamor has worn off and its virtues as a literary seedling may be judged with a critical and dispassionate eye. Not infrequently 'the fine idea' never does emerge from the note-book. Once its meretricious smile has worn off, it is seen to be hollow with deceit."

No better motto exists for the young writer than "make haste slowly." Write at white heat, by all

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means, but if your judgment on any point is the least bit indefinite, it is better to put the plot or the incomplete manuscript or even the finished story on one side for a week or two and then go back to it. You will find that your critical judgment is much keener and decision will often prove easy enough. The secret of this simple little plan is that you come to your own work as a reader and critic, not as a creator.

Submitting plots to your friends is a good plan if they have the patience to listen. Not that their verdict will help you much (unless they are specially qualified to judge), for they are bound to be prejudiced one way or the other; in fact, it is hard to say whether the enthusiasm and praise of one's admiring friends are not more damaging than the determined candor of the person who secretly doesn't think "poor Arthur will ever do any good with his stories." No, the benefit you will reap is by talking over your embryonic stories aloud. On the principle that prophets are unhonored in their own country, it is best to avoid one's own family and to discuss these things with one's friends only. Telling your rough ideas to people helps you to clarify your own vision, to hammer out on the anvil of discussion the actual working-scheme of your story.

Thinking about your plot is almost as good as talking aloud about it. The original inspiration may

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be distinct and clean-cut, but, generally speaking, the building of the story, the characters, the ever-present problem of what to put in and what to leave out — all this is hazy and only dimly visualized. Therefore allow yourself — or, if you are a slow thinker, force yourself — to think. Consider your characters, the various methods you can employ to unfold the story, the hundred and one details of its structure — let it all soak in carefully before you take up a pen. Unless, of course, you are one of those people who cannot think clearly and logically except with a pen in their hands. Stacy Aumonier takes his plots for a walk, literally; and when the idea is absorbed, digested and the various incidents and characters brought into focus, he writes the whole story at one sitting. If an idea does not develop naturally, he scraps it. Elinor Mordaunt, too, is firmly of the opinion that it is hopeless to start tinkering with a short story. If it gets out of hand it must be scrapped, and, after a while, if the plot still seems good enough, rewritten.

I do not suggest that these few ideas are the royal road to success at plot finding. The ultimate judge of your work sits in an editorial chair daily sifting literary wheat from chaff. So much of the stuff that goes to the making of good short stories cannot be taught — individuality of style, humor, sympathy,

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that “unconscious sense of judgment,” a feeling for effect, a sense of balance or proportion, imagination, good taste, and just that human touch which arouses and grips interest, lifting the story out of the ruck of piled MSS.—none of these things can be acquired by learning. Not that every magazine story has all or any of these qualities; and while I, in common with all admirers of the short story as a literary form, should like to see the standard raised all round, and, needless to say, prefer a good story to a bad one, I must still insist on the possibilities awaiting the ordinary writer in the fiction market of today.

And, without doubt, plot is the most important feature of the present-day short story, and in my opinion the feature of amateur efforts which is most susceptible of improvement. Therefore concentrate on getting a good plot. Remember that a story by an unknown writer, however well written and constructed, has very small hope of success if the plot is feeble; and, on the other hand, a good plot goes a very long way and brings a gleam of satisfaction into the editor’s eye.

Hard work is the real secret of success. Reading for profit as well as pleasure, and real hard work. Writing and writing; sometimes writing for hours only to destroy and begin afresh; and unfailing patience and perseverance.

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Ideas for plots do not descend like a bolt out of the blue. The writer who sits biting his penholder, waiting for inspiration, gets “left” in the race. Plots are everywhere around us; it is up to us to go out and look for them and drag them in by their tails.

CHAPTER III

THE COMPOSITION OF THE SHORT STORY

(1) THE OPENING

THE two most common ways of telling a short story are:

- (1) Third person narrative,
- (2) First person singular narrative.

Various other forms exist. The “diary” form (e.g., *The Horla*, by Guy de Maupassant), the “single-letter” form (e.g., *In the Year of Our Lord*, 1918, by Leonard Merrick), the correspondence form (e.g., *A Man of Letters*, by Stacy Aumonier), and the all-dialogue form, which is practically equivalent to the one-act play.

THIRD PERSON NARRATIVE

This is the most popular form, and one generally adapted to the needs of the short story. It gives the writer the “omniscience” which enables him to relate the speech and thoughts of all the characters and to be in as many places at once as is necessary. The writer usually keeps entirely in the background. The story is told in a straightforward manner and the author refrains from butting in with any comments

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of his own. This principle is, however, frequently violated with impunity by well-known authors. Thackeray frequently steps into his pages to point a moral. O. Henry inserts many a slice of personal philosophy to interrupt the action of the story; but these are the privileges of success, and the beginner will be well advised to keep his story impersonal.

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

This method of telling a story has one outstanding advantage. The *personal* point of view lends additional conviction to the story, although at the same time it does restrict the useful omniscience already referred to. There is, however, no objection to a combination of both methods. Many a successful story told in the first person takes full advantage of omniscience. But it has to be done very carefully, otherwise the illusion of reality is at once shattered and the story must fail.

The story-teller must not be egotistical or the reader's sympathy will vanish. "The man who writes an autobiography is telling a story against himself." The hero describing his own exploits is thus in a delicate position. Therefore the type of story which most suitably lends itself to this method of narration is that which is told by a subordinate character. For example, take the Sherlock Holmes

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stories, narrated by his friend Dr. Watson. Watson is an amiable, rather stupid person who acts as an excellent foil to the astute Sherlock Holmes. On the other hand, the same author's *Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* are told by the Brigadier himself; but the story of his adventures has no displeasing flavor of egotism because the boasting is all part of the fun.

Many of Michaél Arlen's stories are told in the first person, with the actual narrator of the story a subordinate character whose outlines are just sufficiently shaded in to prevent the reader's regarding him as a complete nonentity. Thus *The Man with the Broken Nose*, *The Luck of Captain Fortune* and *The Ancient Sin*. A classic instance of this method is Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug*.

The various other ways of telling short stories are temporarily, at any rate, so much out of fashion that it is not worth while discussing them here. However, let no one be discouraged from attempting a story in diary or letter form. It may so happen that such a method will suit his or her particular style or fit in happily with the general scheme of the story; but it is just as well to sound this note of warning: editors of today do not care for these methods. Undoubtedly the best form for the beginner is third person narrative. There is no suggestion of egotism and there is no restriction in telling the story.

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All that can be safely said of the structure of the modern short story is that study will reveal certain fundamental principles. The whole framework is elastic, and any effort which, in the words of Mr. H. G. Wells, is "very bright and moving; it may be horrible or pathetic or funny or beautiful or profoundly illuminating, having only this essential, that it should take from fifteen to fifty minutes to read aloud," is entitled to be considered a short story.

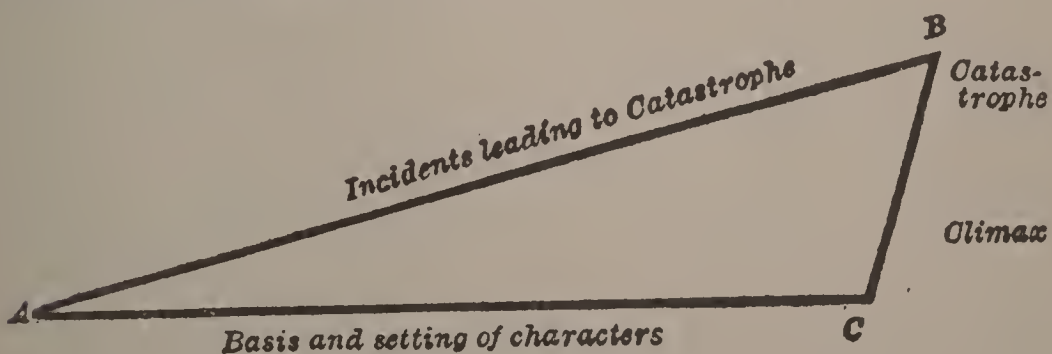
We are not, however, concerned so much with definitions as with the various types of story which experience has shown to be acceptable to editors.

The majority of short stories published may be roughly dissected as follows:

- (1) Opening or Introduction.
- (2) Body of the Story.
- (3) Catastrophe or Climax, and (sometimes)

Dénouement.

Elinor Mordaunt's theory of the short story is, roughly, the shape of a triangle: a long base, one long side, and a short drop.



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“Catastrophe” is used in the Greek sense and signifies that “point” in the story which is emphasized in the chapter on Plot. The “catastrophe” must make a sharp, distinct impression on the reader, whether of surprise, horror, amusement or any other emotion. From this point the story must march with quickened stride to its imminent end. Sometimes the catastrophe (B) occurs in the very last paragraph, and thus coinciding with the climax (C), ends the story. This point is more fully dealt with in the chapter on “Climax.”

The construction of short stories is vitally affected by two considerations — time and space. The action of a short story must be an unbroken thread. It is impossible to set a limit to the time covered by the action; William Caine’s story, *The Pensioner**, is only 1,600 words long, yet effectively covers a period of ninety-seven years.

Generally speaking, the rules which govern the one-act play apply to the short story. The action should occupy only a brief period of time without any dislocations such as “Ten years passed by.” Similarly restricted space is advisable. The entire action may take place within one room. This is known, of course, as “observing the unities,” and is

* Included in *The Best Short Stories of 1922*. Small, Maynard & Company.)

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one of the fundamental differences between the short story and the novel.

The interest must be accelerated as the story is gradually unfolded. Therefore the catastrophe or climax represents the summit of the reader's interest, and it is at this point that the desired effect of the story is produced, the snapshot impression flashed at the reader — and then *Finis*.

The basis of the story, the setting, atmosphere, characterization, anything you want the reader to know before the climax is presented must be worked in beforehand. Not by description but by suggestion. Indirect suggestion is better than direct description. It is true, as one authority points out, that the writer may in a single sentence supply his characters with emotions and sentiments. Adjectives are common enough. But the most effective description is indirect; the revelation of character and emotion by means of dialogue and incident. All this is woven into the fabric of the story, as anyone who analyzes good short stories may readily see for himself. Skill in interweaving the basis of the story and the actual plot is craftsmanship, which (except for a few rare cases of genius or "knack") is a matter of laborious study and experiment. But it makes all the difference between good short stories and bad.

Let us, then, roughly divide the short story into

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three parts, the opening or beginning, the body of the story, and the climax, catastrophe, *dénouement* or end, and consider each fragment in turn.

THE OPENING OR BEGINNING

This is very important. The first few lines of a story have been well described as “the author’s letter of introduction to the reader.” It is essential to arouse the reader’s interest as quickly as possible. Dull, rambling introductions are uninviting and the jaded reader (or editor) is at once prejudiced unfavorably. There is no room in the modern short story for any preamble. The violinist is obliged to tune his instrument before he can play; the writer is at no such disadvantage.

In addition to arousing interest, the beginning of a story has another important function. It must strike the keynote of the story. A humorous story must be indicated by a humorous opening; the adventure story, love story, mystery story, must all have appropriate beginnings. The reader must be prepared for the nature of the story. This, for instance, is a typical humorous story opening:

“Over the expensive life of Henry McAdam Bulpit hovered ever a presence, chilling, whiskered, sinister, cramping it, robbing it of life and joy, oppressive,

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very nearly crushing — his butler, James Crowley.”
(*Henry Bulpit Breaks Away* — Edgar Jepson.)

The following opening plainly indicates the theme:

“It is an old, old threadworn story that often — or always — a man is trapped by the fate or providence or deity or life he has defied. But never was there so strange a trapping, so deliberate and terrible and unescapable a snare, as that which befell Robert Kinsty. Never was the finesse of God more exquisitely set forth.” (*The White Lotus* — H. Bedford Jones, *Blue Book Magazine*.)

In *A Portrait of a Coward*,* Leonard Merrick strikes the keynote of the story in the very first sentence.

“Every Sunday Mrs. Findon went with her two step-daughters to the cemetery and put flowers on the grave.”

Followed eight lines later by:

“and their young stepmother would gaze from the window, wondering whether the pretence of mourning a husband she had not loved was to be her lot for life.”

Although it is not essential to strike the keynote of the story in the very first paragraph, it is always

* In *To tell you the Truth*.

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advisable to do so as quickly as possible. It is not necessary to emphasize this point, as anyone with an instinct for writing will do it almost unconsciously.

The general aim of the writer is to put the reader in the right frame of mind. More particularly to convey either setting, atmosphere, or information. There are three recognized ways of beginning a story:

- (1) With a descriptive opening or introduction.
- (2) With dialogue.
- (3) By plunging straight into the action.

All three methods should (1) arouse interest; (2) strike the keynote of the story.

(1) WITH AN INTRODUCTION OR DESCRIPTIVE OPENING

The old-fashioned introduction, which consisted of one or more paragraphs of moralizing or philosophy, having only an indirect bearing on the story itself, is no longer in favor. One must be prepared, however, for reaction, and as this method may return to favor at some future time, it may be as well to quote one or two examples.

“The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We know of them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed,

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a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which disentangles.”
(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.—Edgar Allan Poe.)

(This introduction continues on these lines for no less than 1,100 words, and ends:

“The narrative which follows will appear to the reader somewhat in the light of commentary upon the propositions just advanced.”)

“We can be but partially acquainted even with the events which actually influence our course through life, and our final destiny. There are innumerable other events—if such they may be called—which come close upon us, yet pass away without actual results, or even betraying their near approach, by the reflection of any light or shadow across our minds. Could we know all the vicissitudes of our fortunes, life would be too full of hope and fear, exultation or disappointment, to afford us a single hour of true serenity. This idea may be illustrated by a page from the secret history of David Swan.” (*David Swan*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne.)

“It is a terribly easy thing to fall into—imperceptibly to glide into—evil-doing, and once embarked on the slippery descent, there is no telling how low one may descend. This, the moral of the story of Mr. Bostock, is, in accordance with modern practice, placed at the beginning of the story instead of at the end, which our grandfathers considered the proper

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place. Nowadays we get the moral over and out of the way as soon as possible and find it good riddance.”
(*Mr. Bostock's Backsliding*, by Arthur Morrison.)

It is about fifteen years since Arthur Morrison wrote the above and today it would be true to say we have dispensed with the moral altogether. It may still be implicit in the story, but any statement of it is unfashionable.

The introduction *per se*, then, although occasionally used by well-known writers, is best avoided by the beginner today, except in a form so brief and elliptical that it becomes a mere literary “pause for breath” before launching into the story proper. As, for example:

“There are murders with a preface of twisted emotions and insane obsession. The chronicling of these, the unravelling of the threads of cause and effect, are left to a Dostoievsky. But the story of Bill Emmot is quite a simple one. Shortly after six o'clock of a summer evening he sat in the bar of ‘The Plume of Feathers,’” etc. (*The End of the Car*, by Eric Maschwitz.)

The “story within a story” obviously requires an introduction. This popular form is rather like a nut which has to be cracked before it can be eaten and enables the reader to settle down comfortably for the real yarn. It is also a useful device to convey the

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setting and general circumstances which lead up to the story.

The descriptive opening is probably the most popular method of beginning a short story. It must not be dull, stodgy, conventional or commonplace, nor put the reader to any mental effort to get a grip of the story. It must be terse and crisp and stimulate the reader's interest at once. The descriptive opening may be used to convey setting or atmosphere, or a combination of all three.

(a) TO CONVEY CHARACTER:

“Miss Winifred Goode sat in her garden in the shade of a clipped yew, an unopened novel on her lap, and looked at the gabled front of the Tudor house that was hers and had been her family's for many generations. In that house, Dun's Hall, in that room beneath the southernmost gable, she had been born. From that house, save for casual absences rarely exceeding a month in duration, she had never stirred. All the drama, such as it was, of her life had been played in that house, in that garden. Up and down the parapeted stone terrace walked the ghosts of all those who had been dear to her — her father, a vague but cherished memory, her mother, dead three years since, to whose invalid and somewhat selfish needs she had devoted all her full young womanhood.” (*The Conqueror* — William J. Locke.)

“Mrs. Poultney-Beelbrow is the kind of woman

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who drips with refinement. Everything else has been squeezed out of her. Even her hair, which once was red, has been dried to a rusty grey. Her narrow face is pinched and bloodless; the lines of her figure blurred by shapeless and colorless materials, as though she resented any suggestion of organic functioning, as though blood itself were not quite 'nice.' ” (*Mrs. Beelbrow's Lions* — Stacy Aumonier.)

(b) TO CONVEY SETTING:

“Just past the Trafalgar Hotel, which overhangs the river at East Greenwich, there runs an alley with a double row of small houses facing each other eye to eye. The backs of those on the south side are hemmed in by a huddle of miscellaneous buildings — that might have been shot out of a rubbish tip, save for the two at the far end, from the upper windows of which one may catch a glimpse of the serene, flower-bordered walks and mulberry trees of Trinity Hospital gardens.

“But the houses on the river side are pierced by alleys and arches, revealing a strip, or half lemon, of silvery light, crossed and recrossed by sienna-tinted sails, fractions of great steamers trailing pennants of smoke, or the whole body of a Tilbury Lighterage Tug with its striped yellow and red funnel; each picture set deep in a framework of blackened buildings.

“It was in the upper room of one of these riverside houses, built of black, overlapping timber, that Dor lived . . .” (*The Goldfish* — Elinor Mordaunt.)

“At six o'clock the back streets were dark and

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black; but once in the Bethnal Green Road, blots and flares of gas and naphtha shook and flickered till every slimy cobble in the cartway was silver tipped.” (*Three Rounds*, by Arthur Morrison, from *Tales of Mean Streets*.)

(c) TO CONVEY ATMOSPHERE (AND THEME):

“The laboratory was empty, and in darkness save for the night shimmer which peered down through its slanted skylights. A place of life and death, this laboratory. A haunted place. The ghosts of a thousand nameless explorers into the dim territories of science seemed hovering about the phosphorescent marble of that long desk-like shelf over which John Cartwright would bend, hour after hour, among his pallid retorts, and his stacked test-tubes and the Bunsen burners his steady hand kindled to blue cones of steady flame.” (*Marriner’s Law*, by Gilbert Frankau.)

(c) TO CONVEY ATMOSPHERE (AND SETTING):

“The still air of the tropic night hung listless and langorous. A host of nameless insects wheeled in a dusty halo around the blackened glass of the oil lamp that swung from a beam and beat against the wooden walls. Beyond the verandah-rail the blackness stretched like a cloth of jet in which no star glimmered. In that eerie silence, Donald Bowen sensed the electricity with which the atmosphere was charged.” (*The Opal Ring*, by Edmund Snell.)

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(d) TO CONVEY INFORMATION:

This, generally speaking, is a poor opening, and a sign of weakness. In nine cases out of ten it is necessary to place before the reader certain facts which do not come into the categories of setting or character. Whenever possible, these facts should be deftly inserted into the story while it is in motion. A much more realistic effect is obtained by conveying information *incidentally*. It is very rarely that this becomes impossible and that it is found necessary to prelude the story with a paragraph of detail. When it cannot be avoided, the facts must be made *interesting*.

An opening paragraph on the lines of the following is the kind of thing to avoid:

“My name is Edward George Eden. I was born at Trentham in Staffordshire, my father being employed in the gardens there. I lost my mother when I was three years old, and my father when I was five, my uncle, George Eden, then adopting me as his own son. He was a single man, self-educated and well-known in Birmingham as an enterprising journalist; he educated me generously, fired my ambition to succeed in the world, and at his death, which happened four years ago, left me his entire fortune, a matter of about five hundred pounds after all outgoing charges were paid. I was then eighteen.”

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But if the pill be sugared sufficiently the reader will swallow it readily enough.

The above paragraph was, as a matter of fact, prefaced by the following:

“I set this story down, not expecting it will be believed, but, if possible, to prepare a way of escape for the next victim. He, perhaps, may profit by my misfortune. My own case, I know, is hopeless, and I am now in some measure prepared to meet my fate.”

In justice to Mr. H. G. Wells, who wrote this story (*The Story of the late Mr. Elvesham*),* I must point out that the bald, unvarnished statement of his second paragraph is a deliberate and clever device to impart an atmosphere of reality to the story.

Unless, then, there is some special reason for presenting the reader with a paragraph of facts, the writer will do better to distribute them throughout the story. There are always plenty of suitable openings to convey information to the reader without cramming them down his throat.

Character, setting and atmosphere are so often skillfully dovetailed into the opening passages of a story that it is practically impossible to separate them.

* In *The Country of the Blind*.

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(2) DIALOGUE

This is not such a common method of breaking the ice as is generally supposed. Of a total of seventy-two stories published in eight magazines for July, 1923, only eight stories begin with a conversational opening.

The dialogue opening must be done well or not at all. Nothing grimaces at the editor so much as a feeble dialogue commencement.

The kind of story that is best served by a dialogue opening is the light humorous love story. It must be remembered that dialogue is not used for its own sake, but to convey character, setting or incident. Character, for example, is revealed by the following dialogue opening:

“‘I don’t believe all these stories about German atrocities,’ came from the paler of the two youths on my left.” (*Jules Schumacher — Englishman*, by Gilbert Frankau.)

Later chapters deal more fully with the revelation of character by dialogue.

Dialogue may also be used to convey setting and, more frequently, incident. A dialogue opening attracts the eye and, properly exploited, represents “human interest,” thereby fulfilling one of the two

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chief functions of the opening, viz., arousing the reader's interest.

(3) BY PLUNGING STRAIGHT INTO THE ACTION

There is a marked tendency among present-day editors to favor this method. The story should begin as one editor has said, on the threshold of the plot if not in the middle of it. This typical magazine form allows for no preliminary survey of setting or character, and thus imposes on the writer the obligation of weaving deftly into the fabric of the story as it proceeds the various aspects of character or background that the reader must be made aware of.

This method of beginning the story is easily mastered, as will be seen from a glance at the magazines, and it should certainly form part of the young writer's equipment. This is a typical opening:

“Fred Baisley turned quickly into Queen Street, almost ran the last fifty yards of his way, and whistling ‘Dixie’ with short-breathed fervor, opened the door of his own shop.” (*Antiques for Two*, by Bohun Lynch.)

All these methods of beginning a short story are liable to overlapping. Indeed, if the story requires it, the professional writer will dovetail setting, character and action into the first paragraph itself. For example:

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“An obese Chinaman crouched at his window in one of the weather-board houses leaning towards each other across the narrow alley-way of Cherry Garden Pier. The dirty blind was half down, but he sat pressed against the wall at the side of it, peering through the crack, well out of sight; out of mind, too, for no one had a thought of Sing Al Wen being in that upper room of his, sacred to Fan-tan and opium, at six o'clock on a hot summer's evening.”*

Note that in this one opening paragraph (1) the action begins.

“A Chinaman crouched at his window, peering through the crack . . . at six o'clock.” (2) Character is conveyed (the suggestion of the “obese Chinaman” peeping from behind the blind, with the additional suggestion of deceit — “for no one had a thought,” etc.).

(3) The process of painting in the setting or background has also begun in these few lines: “The weather-board houses leaning towards each other across the narrow alley-way of Cherry Garden Pier. The dirty blind . . . the upper room, sacred to Fan-tan and opium . . . a hot summer's evening.”

This — in a word — is craftsmanship. Only by a careful study of other writers' work may this skill in the manipulation of words and phrases, sentences

* *Peepers All*, by Elinor Mordaunt.

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and paragraphs, be acquired by the beginner. But it is well worth while.

Occasionally the opening of the story is designed simply to catch the reader's eye. This bid for the reader's interest usually takes the form of an unexpected statement, epigram, paradox, a crisp, short sentence or a fragment of witty dialogue. Many well-known writers are fond of this method, and there is no objection to the beginner adopting the device, provided he can handle it skillfully enough.

"Charlie had no true vice in him. All the same, a man may be over-taxed, over-harassed, over-driven, over-pricked and over-starved right up to the edge; and the fascination of the big space below may easily pull him over." (*The Song*, by May Edginton.)

"It was the maddest and most picturesque hotel at which we had ever stopped." (*The Bat and Belfry Inn*, Alan Graham.)

"I am quite aware that in giving you this story just as I was told it I shall incur the charge of downright and deliberate lying." (*Major Wilbraham*, Hugh Walpole.)

"This is quite a simple story, but it is about a lord." (*The Shameless Behavior of a Lord*, Michael Arlen.)

"Baldy Woods reached for the bottle, and got it." (*Hearts and Crosses*, O. Henry.)

"He wished he were dead. It was not a phrase, a verbal extravagance; he wished it." (*With Intent to Defraud*, Leonard Merrick.)

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“The financier was cracking walnuts when the curate arrived.” (*The Favorite Plot*, Leonard Merrick.)

“Mr. Jobson awoke with a Sundayish feeling, probably due to the fact that it was Bank Holiday.” (*Fine Feathers*, from *Ship's Company*, by W. W. Jacobs.)

In a series of complete stories a similarity of opening is a device that helps to give unity to the whole. The well-known *Night Watchman* openings of W. W. Jacobs provide a case in point.

How shall I begin my story? is a question that can only be decided by the requirements of the story itself. A study of the methods outlined in this chapter, amplified, as always, by a wide survey of current fiction, and the methods favored by successful writers, gives the young writer a fairly wide range, and it should not be difficult to come to a decision. The main points to bear in mind are:

The opening must arouse the reader's interest at once;

should serve a definite purpose (convey setting or character or information, or a blend of them); and

should, if possible, strike the keynote of the story as a whole.

Above all — Don't be conventional.

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(2) THE BODY OF THE STORY

A rough division of the short story into three parts — opening, body, and end — has this disadvantage. It may lead the beginner to imagine that short stories split up naturally into these three component parts. Nothing could be farther from the truth. A clear line of demarcation very seldom exists; in fact, so often do all three merge into each other that it is impossible to say where one begins and the other ends. This is true of all the characteristics of the short story, setting, plot, character, incident, emotion — all are so subtly blended into one artistic whole as to be inseparable. You cannot take a short story to pieces as you would a machine.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to examine the materials which go to the making of a story, provided that one always bears in mind that there is no fixed pattern and that there exists an endless variety in composition. When the first short story was written there were no rules nor traditions to govern its shape or form; the short story, like any other form of artistic expression, has had to develop and shape itself as it went along. Today the young writer may see for himself what constitutes a short story. Nothing is to be gained by a study of formulæ and definitions; but an intelligent application of the general

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principles which are so plentifully illustrated in the work of established authors will prove invaluable.

The plot is the skeleton of the story. One of the most difficult problems which faces the young author is that of putting flesh on its bones. The majority of beginners err in the direction of excess. They write too much, and what they write is usually so badly proportioned that the real merit of their plot is obscured. As one critic has said, the story sprawls like a jelly-fish all over the page.

It is not a matter of good writing or bad. Short story writing does not require fine writing; but something infinitely more difficult — selection, discrimination, and very often drastic amputation. Every word must tell; every phase of the story must be sharp and distinct. Charles Lamb once described a character in fiction as a “ratherish” person; the short story is not the place for “ratherish” people. All its characters, emotions, incidents, must stand out in sharp relief. Above all, something must always be happening. The story must “march,” and the pace is a gradually increasing one until the catastrophe or climax. Every paragraph — sometimes nearly every sentence — should carry the story a distinct step forward.

It may reasonably be argued that it is often necessary to convey to the reader a certain amount of

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information and explanation in addition to the background and setting, "local color," etc. This is quite true; but all this should be done as quickly as possible in order to clear the stage, as it were, for the unfolding of the plot. Long-winded explanations and descriptions are out of place; the process is a much more subtle one. An adjective, the deft insertion of an adjectival clause — all these are put in as the story progresses. With the art that conceals art the reader is enabled to form a clear mental picture of a scene or a character. A direct statement is nearly always avoided. It is the important short story principle of indirect suggestion being better than direct description.

To take an elementary illustration from Arthur Morrison's entertaining story, *Mr. Bostock's Backsliding*, in which it is necessary to bring to the notice of the reader the existence of a prison in the neighborhood, note how the mention of it is skillfully tucked into the early part of the story.

Describing Scarbourn,

"the most genteel town on the English coast, where every male visitor positively must change all his clothes at least three times a day, and no lady must be seen to wear anything twice,"

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the author continues:

“No place on earth basks in a more sacred odor of perfect respectability than this blessed spot, with nothing to mar its bliss but the presence of a vulgar convict prison a few miles inland. . . .”

It is not necessary to describe everything in detail. As in a clever black and white drawing where the gaps are adequately filled by the eye, so in fiction the reader's memory, aided by a subconscious association of ideas, completes the picture. You may remember Chaucer's friar who, before sitting down by the fireside, chased away the cat. You do not require any explanation to understand that the friar had chosen the coziest corner for himself. To read of a man wiping his forehead with a large red handkerchief is a better way of introducing the red handkerchief than by saying the man had a red handkerchief in his pocket. All these little details — often of great significance — should be worked into the main thread of the story, *viz.*, the action.

The body of the story is the story itself. The opening may actually have begun the story; if not, it has prepared the way. The reader is (presumably) in the right frame of mind, knows what kind of entertainment is in store for him, and, in order to be entertained, is willing to believe in your scene and your characters.

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At this point it may occur to the writer that the outline of the plot is a very different thing from the action of the story. In the plot the sequence of events is naturally determined by cause and effect; actions and their consequences. In the story the consequences very often have to come first and the revelation of the actions which produced them has to be delayed till later on in the story; otherwise the reader will lose all interest.

The detective or mystery story is a good instance of this. A murder, or a crime, is committed. The reader, along with the investigators in the story, is baffled and uncertain of the outcome until perhaps the very end of the story, when, hey presto! the criminal is unmasked. The *dénouement* then reveals the steps which led up to the discovery of his identity, thus bringing the story to a plausible and satisfying conclusion.

This quality of preserving the reader's interest is simply — suspense.

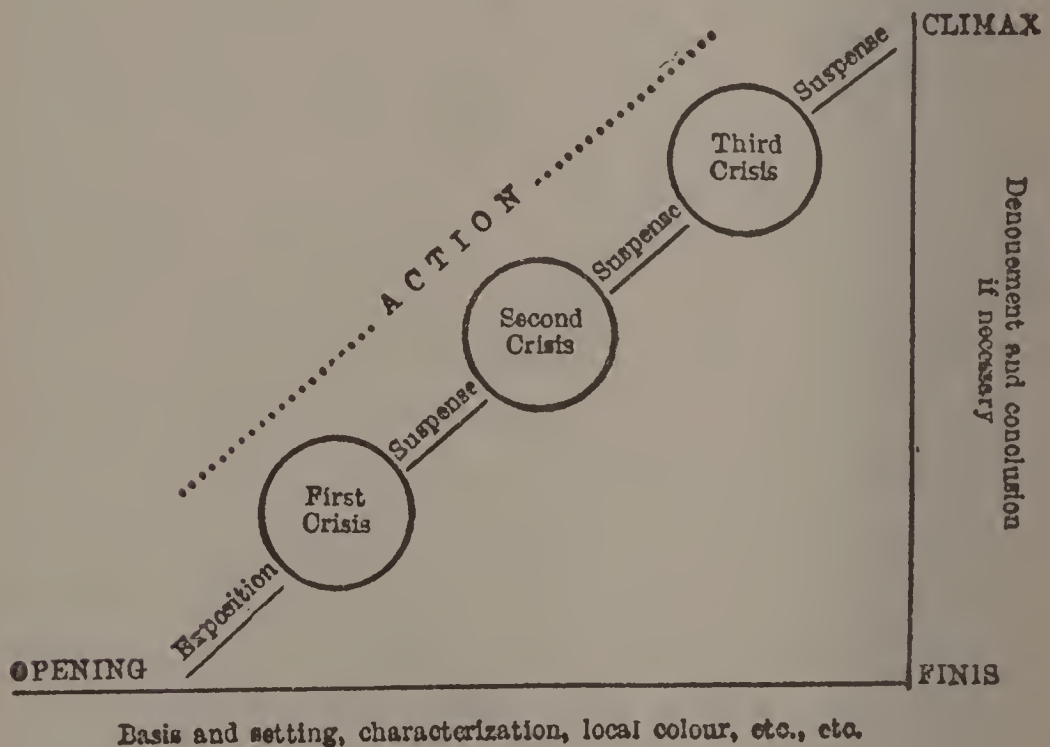
How is suspense created?

We have seen that plot differs from straightforward narrative in one important respect — complication. The thread of the story is suddenly twisted. Something happens; the story takes a new turn or presents an incident which is apparently unforeseen. Curiosity is aroused and the foundation is laid for

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a crisis. The quality of Suspense follows the presentation of as many crises as the story may contain. The number of crises is regulated by the requirements of the plot. All good short stories contain one crisis; the majority contain more than one. When there is more than one crisis the dramatic effect should be heightened by each succeeding crisis. At the same time the action is accelerated.

This diagram — an elaboration of Elinor Mor-daunt's theory (see page 44) — shows a conception of the ordinary short story which may be helpful. By



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“exposition” is meant the rise of interest by either the statement of the problem or the circumstances which lead up to the first crisis. The base line represents the thread which should run through the entire story revealing background, character, atmosphere, etc., always carefully subordinated to the main interest of the plot. As previously pointed out, the climax may be such as to render any further *dénouement* unnecessary. The climax and *dénouement* are dealt with more fully later.

For the purpose of examining the structural composition of the body of the story, I propose to take the typical form in which character is overshadowed by plot. It was Robert Louis Stevenson’s rather drastic theory, by the way, that character should always be subordinate to incident.

Frequently the plot idea develops from character and environment. Many of the best writers prefer this development of plot from character to the development of character from plot. It is a point which every writer must decide for himself. Usually one is guided by the type of story under consideration. Stories with plenty of action and incident are primarily plot stories in which character is of secondary importance; while in stories of character plot is naturally subordinate to the main interest. It is often difficult to distinguish the two types in the

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finished product. Character and plot are so closely interwoven and so dependent on each other that it is sometimes impossible to guess whether the writer began with his plot or his characters.

The amount of incident in short stories naturally varies tremendously. On the one hand there is the typical magazine action-story in which enough incident is often crammed into 5,000 words to fill a full-length novel; and on the other, the study of character, or sketch, in which there is scarcely any incident at all. The character story is often reduced to the level of a picture in words, although it need not be. Stacy Aumonier's *The Funny Man's Day*, for example, is a delightful revelation of character in which incident plays a large part. But, generally speaking, the story which depends on plot for its effect is the type which the young writer should first study and experiment with. While the static story (character) has its market and is a satisfying form of expression, the dynamic story (action) is more readily saleable. And as Stevenson himself wrote:

“In character-studies the pleasure we take is critical; we watch, we approve, we smile at incongruities, we are moved to sudden heats of sympathy with courage, suffering, or virtue. But the characters are still themselves, they are not us; the more clearly they are depicted, the more widely do they stand away from us, the more imperiously do they thrust us back

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into our place as a spectator. . . . It is not character but incident that woos us out of our reserve. Something happens as we desire it to happen to ourselves; some situation that we have long dallied with in fancy, is realized in the story with enticing and appropriate details. Then we forget the characters; then we push the hero aside; then we plunge into the tale in our own person and bathe in fresh experience; and then, and then only, do we say that we have been reading a romance.”

Let us deal, then, with the story of incident. The first step is to take the plot outline and block it out roughly on the lines of the diagram on page 66. At first the young writer may find it not at all easy to select the crises in the story; but it should not be difficult to pick out the main crisis and work backwards from that point. Here it will be found that there are two kinds of incidents. One is the incident that belongs to the plot proper and the other the incident which has to be introduced to carry the story smoothly and naturally from one stage to another. The latter is invented by the writer as required, and has been called the “developing incident.”

The author knows the incidents of his plots before he begins to write, but has to improvise “developing” incidents as the story crystallizes into being.

In *The Looking Glass*, by J. D. Beresford, the story of Rachel Deane, a young girl who goes to visit

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an old aunt of the same name whom she has never seen, we find Rachel standing in front of the looking-glass:

“With a graceful habitual gesture she put up her hand and lightly touched her cheeks with a soft, caressing movement of her finger tips.”

This is a “developing” or contributory incident on which emphasis happens to be laid by the fact of its coming at the end of the first section of the story. The aunt proves to be “a raddled, repulsive creature” whose “hollow cheeks stiff with powder, lips brightened to a fantastic scarlet,” assist in indicating that the old lady “had actually persuaded herself into the delusion that she still had the appearance of a young girl.” To sensitive Rachel’s dismay, her aunt insists on their remarkable physical resemblance. This preys on the young girl’s mind so, that when we read that the aunt, pausing before the mirror, lifted

“her wasted hand and delicately touched her whitened hollow cheek with the tips of her heavily jewelled fingers,”

we are not surprised that “Rachel stared in horror. . . . Because of that perfect duplication of her own characteristic pose and gesture, the likeness had flashed out clear and unmistakable.”

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This is the “plot” incident. The “developing” incident which preceded it is subordinate, but necessary to the unfolding of the story. It adds emphasis and is also a link in the chain of interest.

From this simple illustration the function of the “developing” incident may be easily understood. It is dependent on a main plot incident and plays a highly important technical part in the story.

A clear understanding of the difference between plot incident and developing incident will help the young writer to plan out the most difficult structural problem of the body of the story. This is *sequence*. On sequence depends the success of his efforts to create suspense. As soon as a satisfactory sequence-synopsis is drafted out it will readily be seen between which points in the story the reader must be kept in doubt as to the next complication, whether it be yet another crisis in the story, or the climax itself.

Not that it always requires deliberate effort to create suspense. Very often suspense is created naturally by the action of the story. But although the reader should not be able to say to himself *with certainty*, “I know what’s coming next,” the effect to aim at is to produce in the reader’s mind a sort of premonition of what is going to happen, so that when the next step is revealed it appears to be the perfectly natural logical outcome of all that has preceded it.

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The reader must not feel certain of the outcome or he will lose interest, but there must be sufficient clue in what he has read already to make the outcome appear inevitable. This applies forcibly to the chief period of suspense which immediately precedes the climax.

A word of warning is necessary at this point. The writer must not deliberately mystify the reader unless it is an integral feature of the plot to do so. Suspense will come about in satisfactory measure as a result of effective disposition of incidents in their fitting order. The problem is not one of suspense but of sequence.

The Plot Book will come in handy here. Compare the plot summaries you have made with the stories as they appeared. Note the difference in the *sequence* of incident; how in the actual story a revelation is delayed, how the reader is kept in doubt until the critical moment arrives, and so on. When it is a question of applying the principle in practice there is no infallible rule. An "unconscious sense of judgment" will come to the young writer's rescue; and, after all, he is the one best qualified to solve the little problems of the story that is exclusively his own. And the problem is usually much simpler than may be imagined.

A more difficult problem is concerned with emo-

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tion. It is a first principle that the short story must create some kind of emotion in the reader, whether it be sympathy (in its true sense), horror, joy, laughter, pathos, excitement, or surprise. Anyone with any sort of story-telling instinct can scarcely fail to produce some such effect on the ordinary reader; but a careful balancing and arrangement of all the material that goes to produce emotion is a prime need of good story-telling. Here again the indirect method is more effective than the direct. To describe the effect of an apparition say, on one of the characters, is more vivid than to describe the apparition itself.

“I could not repress a cry of astonishment.”

“He stared, fascinated.”

“Her cheeks paled; her limbs stiffened; she was too frightened to utter a sound.”

Fiction is full of sentences like these. Carefully handled, they heighten the dramatic effect in a way that direct unadorned description could not produce. This will not, I hope, prejudice the young writer against a plain, straightforward style of writing. It is in the manner of telling a story that the indirect method is sometimes to be preferred. As far as style (which we come to later) is concerned, there is nothing to beat simplicity.

How is emotion produced? Once more mere formulæ are useless. A study of good fiction will

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reveal the use of a number of literary devices which may profitably be imitated. The use of sarcasm, exclamations or irritation, exasperation, assist in creating emotional effect. Gesture is frequently expressive of emotion. Thus:

He *clenched his fists* as he . . .

The invalid *shook his head* impatiently.

Johnson *shrugged his shoulders*.

His hand trembled as he opened the letter.

“I cannot deal with it now,” said Owen, *waving him aside*.

She *snatched* at the paper.

The girl held to him *with stiffened fingers* while a tattoo struck the door.

Dialogue is another useful device to secure emotion. The use of the dash to split up speech into fragments is suggestive of emotion.

“Henry gasped.

“ ‘You mean — Vitongo?’

“ ‘The whole outfit.’

“ ‘Vitongo ———!’

“ ‘What t’hell else did you expect?’ ”*

The dash gives a kind of gasping effect to the words, and the short, nervous sentences strengthen the

* From *The Pagan*, by John Russell. (*In Dark Places*.)

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impression. The value of restraint in fiction should, however, never be overlooked. Sometimes more can be said in one word than in two or three.

Read as many good short stories as you can. Have a pencil handy, and when you come to a passage that is especially moving or exciting, mark it in the margin. Don't look for such passages deliberately, note only those which grip your interest as you read them. Then, when you have finished with the story as a reader, come back to it as a student. Note how the effect is produced. If the passage defies satisfactory analysis, put the story away and write that part of it in your own words. When done, compare your own effort with the original. This method is invaluable to the beginner, enabling him, as it does, to approach a problem from the real starting point. It will also show how vitally important is *economy in words*. O. Henry had this wonderful gift of economy in narrative amounting to genius. W. W. Jacobs has it. It is a distinctive mark of the true short story writer.

Maupassant's famous short story *The Necklace* is an admirable illustration of what to omit. A man and his wife in humble circumstances are invited to a big official dance. The young husband spends all his money on a frock for her to wear, but she has no jewels. At last she borrows from a friend a superb necklace of diamonds and goes happy to the ball.

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Arriving home, she finds to her horror that the necklace is lost! Their frantic search and inquiries prove unavailing. To gain time they write to Mme. Forestier, the friend, saying that the clasp is broken and they are having it mended. At the end of a week they have lost all hope. The husband sells all he has, assumes ruinous obligations compromising the rest of his life, in order to replace the necklace. He raises 36,000 francs, and a similar necklace is bought and restored to Mme. Forestier. Then they set to work to pay off their colossal debt. For ten years they endure dire poverty and harsh discomfort, but at last everything is paid off. Then one day the friend meets the wife in the street. "Oh, my poor Mathilde," she cries, "how you have changed!" The poor woman then tells the whole story. "Mme. Forestier, strongly moved, took her two hands. 'Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, my necklace was paste. It was worth at most five hundred francs!'"

The length of this story is 3,000 words. It ends with the sentence quoted in the above summary. Observe how much is omitted here. Maupassant does not go on to tell how Mme. Forestier returned the necklace, nor point the moral of the wasted ten years of laborious effort and toil. It is true that they could not be restored like the necklace, but Maupassant knew what to omit in the interest of emotional

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effect. What to leave out is, indeed, almost as important as what to put in a short story. There can be—and in most stories often are—left out, for instance, big slices of time. The story is not necessarily a consecutive narrative. The scene may be switched somewhere else without any explanation on the writer's part. A single row of asterisks will serve to indicate either lapse of time or change of scene and is a device frequently employed in the modern short story.

The action, too, should be stripped of all unnecessary or irrelevant matter.

This, it will be remembered, is one of the features of the short story which particularly distinguishes it from the novel. Constant revision and deletion are the best means of reducing a story to proper proportions. Don't be afraid of leaving something to the imagination of the reader. As soon as the story has got into its stride avoid all explanations and discussions that do not help the action along. Whatever you do don't put the brake on — it is fatal. Note, for example, the rapidity of the action in the following passage from a story by the late Agnes and Egerton Castle (*Enchanted Casements*).

“Like an arrow from the bow he sped after Larilière, who had shaken hands with his host, and was disappearing into the hotel portals.

“Julian caught him up in the vestibule. He stood

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aside while the chief Precursor accepted the services of one waiter to assist him into his driving coat, and of another for the lighting of his cigar. Then a dog-cart, scarcely less dashing than his own, was driven round, and Larilière, mounting, took the reins from the hands of the groom.

“As the man prepared to jump up beside his master, Julian was down the steps in two leaps and arrested him.

“‘One moment, Monsieur de Larilière! One word.’

“The pale glassy eyes looked down at him, and he thought there was a flicker in them, gone as soon as come, of fear.

“‘Speak quick, then,’ said the polished bully, at his most insolent, ‘for I have a *rendez-vous*.’

“‘One word is enough,’ said Julian. ‘Coward!’”

It may seem superfluous to advise the beginner to remember he is telling a story, but a wide experience of MSS. indicates plainly that such advice is generally needed. So many amateur efforts bury the actual story beneath a mass of “clever” writing that few editors will take the trouble to disentangle it. It cannot be too often emphasized that the story’s the thing.

Conveying the story to the reader is, as Gilbert Frankau has expressed it, best done by a series of “word-pictures.”

“The whole process of story-writing,” says the author of *Peter Jameson*, “is a conveyance of pictures

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from the mind of the writer to the mind of his reader. A complete visualization of the story he means to tell, of the characters who play their part in it and of the local color in which those characters play their part, is absolutely necessary. A writer must be able to see in his mind's eye the whole story. It must be as visible to him as the wood of his writing-desk or the walls of his study. He must know his characters and his scenes so well that he can describe every feature of them.

“This visualization or seeing process can be either real or imaginary; that is to say, the writer may either describe places and people actually known to him, or places and people that only exist in his imagination. But in either case, the conveyance of these pictures to the reader's mind must be so sharp that the impression is always *real*.”

This pictorial conception of the writer's art may be usefully remembered when the young writer gets into the stride of the story. Making “word-pictures” is a valuable literary exercise. Anything that strikes the writer's imagination, a girl's face, a room, a man ploughing a field, a lighthouse at night, a beggar in the street, all provide subjects for “word-pictures.” Self-criticism is difficult but will be made easier by putting aside one's efforts until they are forgotten. Then, when they are re-read they should instantly convey a mental picture. If the picture is vague, it fails. It should jump to the eye, as the French say.

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Cultivate picturization in fiction — it is well worth while.

So far, so good. But there is so much that cannot be taught that with these few generalizations I must leave the subject of writing the body of the story. In many ways it is the most vital part of the storyteller's craft, but beyond drawing attention to established methods and stimulating a study of stories by good authors one can teach very little. It is one thing to take a manuscript, indicate its defects and show how they may be remedied, condensation here, deletion there, dialogue in this place, rewriting on different lines in that place; but in so plastic a medium as the short story it is impossible to lay down any number of fixed rules and regulations. Particularly is this true of the body of the story. Beginning and end have functions which may be more readily defined, but, provided that the writer tells his story in such a way as to hold the reader's interest, there can be little adverse criticism of his manner of telling it. The average reader is the ultimate critic, and if he is satisfied there cannot be much wrong with the story. Molère knew what he was about when he read his manuscripts to his cook.

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(3) THE CLIMAX

The construction of the final movement of the short story puts the writer's powers to the severest test of all. The ending will leave a decisive impression on the reader — indeed, it is intended to do so — and whether this be satisfactory or unsatisfactory depends on the writer's skill in handling the most important situation in his story, the climax.

Everything leads up to the climax. All the threads of interest are gathered up and merge into the "point" of the story. The reader should feel a definite emotional shock, whether it be surprise at the final revelation, satisfaction at the triumph of right over might, horror at the tragic outcome, or thrill at reaching the high-water mark of excitement. At this point the writer, to use a colloquialism, dare not let the reader down, except at the risk of ruining the story.

Short stories end in various ways, according to differences of kind. There is the surprise-ending story in which the literary bomb bursts in practically the last line; the mystery or detective story which usually needs an explanatory *dénouement* recapitulating the circumstances of the problem, and untying all the knotted threads of the story; the conventional happy ending of the love story; the philosophic end-

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ing, which is the modern equivalent of the now out-of-date moral; and many others which should be familiar to all assiduous readers of fiction.

Each requires different treatment, but all require the most careful handling. As we have seen, the action is accelerated to its highest speed at a point immediately preceding the climax. Every word is vital; a false movement will at once snap the taut elastic of the reader's interest. Every sentence must be subjected to the most critical examination.

The climax, and that part of the story which leads up to it, are, in the opinion of many professional writers, best written at white heat. Some authors prefer to write their endings first. This plan has the merit of fixing the desired final impression and enabling the writer to balance the remainder of the story. An artistically perfect short story must be well balanced; and the balance of a story undoubtedly hinges on the climax.

We have seen how suspense naturally follows the main crisis, and paves the way for the climax. The forces of the story are gathered for the decisive moment; the characters are poised ready for their fate; the reader is prepared for the outcome, although it may be — probably has been — skillfully camouflaged.

The climax must be striking and yet convincing;

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the reader must be denied the opportunity of criticizing it, even unconsciously, as "far-fetched." It must appear inevitable; and in his lightning mental review of the incidents of the story the climax must appear to be the one logical and satisfying result of all that has gone before.

It must not be prolonged; it should be intense and brief, released, as it were, by a literary trigger. It should have all the precise crispness of the end of one of Euclid's propositions. Note how effectively the climax is handled in *Cap'en Jollyfax's Gun* (see page 154).

Climax is the one point of a short story which can be easily identified. It is a kind of high-water mark of interest.

Here again the student should make a careful study of the methods of well-known writers, to see how climax is handled by experts, and apply the knowledge thus gained to his own work.

Immediately following the climax the reader's interest inevitably relaxes. Suspense is all over; the tale is done. Delay is now fatal, and if there is anything more to add it must be done quickly.

Anything that succeeds the climax is known as either *Dénouement* or Conclusion. As we have seen, the climax itself may end the story, and thus render further *dénouement* and conclusion unnecessary.

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Sometimes, however, a story will require a word or two of final explanation, a neat rounding off, and a dismissal of the characters.

The object of the *dénouement* (untying) is to remove any doubts that may linger in the reader's mind; it serves a purely explanatory purpose. Some critics assert that as no explanation should be necessary subsequent to the climax, the *dénouement* is not properly a feature of the short story, but this is surely too hasty a judgment. Many of our best short stories have a *dénouement*, which could not conceivably be dispensed with, or inserted elsewhere in the story. Besides, an artistic effect may often be obtained by this means, and add to the quality of the story.

The *dénouement* is not a separate part of the short story, but should be laid on the foundation of "key sentences" in the body of the narrative. "Key sentences" may be either positive or negative; that is, they may provide a genuine clue to the ultimate *dénouement*, or a false clue. It is quite a legitimate device to lay false clues in order to camouflage the real outcome and sustain the reader's interest. Note, for instance, how ingeniously the suggestion of "one boy at least formed a dark project of hoarding pennies, buying powder, escaping by perilous descent from his bedroom window and firing Cap'en Jollyfax's gun lawlessly in the depth of night," lays a false

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trail for the reader of *Cap'en Jollyfax's Gun*.^{*} With the swift rise of the action to the climax, "The gun! It was the gun! Somebody had fired it! Those boys — those rascal boys, rascal boys, cheeky boys, plaguey boys, villainous, accursed, infernal boys!" the reader, with the key sentence at the back of his mind, jumps immediately to the wrong conclusion — which is at it should be.

Any preliminary reference to an incident, scene or character that plays an important part late in the story, is a "key sentence."

A keen sense of the dramatic is the best guide to devising the *dénouement* and conclusion. The dramatic quality of a short story centers almost entirely in its last phase. With the speeding up of the action, the story joins issue with the drama. It is a tense, emotional moment for both writer and reader.

The beginner should carefully examine a number of good short stories and study for himself the treatment of *dénouement*. He will find that it does not always necessarily make a disclosure; it may take the form of a hint of future events; it may even leave the reader in doubt; point a moral; or merely satisfy the emotions. But whatever form it may take, it must be in harmony with the rest of the story, and be told in as few words as possible.

^{*} See Chapter VIII.

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Conclusion is usually the final polishing touch to the short story. Short story writing has, indeed, been compared with the art of the lapidary who industriously polishes and polishes his stone. The conclusion of a story should leave a pleasant and satisfying taste in the reader's mouth. It is often used as a device to "get rid of the characters," always a problem for the fiction writer.

Whether a story requires a *dénouement* or conclusion or both will naturally depend on the story itself. The writer's judgment will seldom be at fault if he has any writing instinct at all. Roughly, dramatic stories end at the climax, which is thus identical with the conclusion; humorous stories require conclusion, but little or no *dénouement*; mystery stories require *dénouement* without a formal conclusion; love stories and adventure stories usually feature both. But the exceptions are almost as numerous, and it is impossible to legislate definitely on a point which only the requirements of the individual story and the writer's own judgment can decide.

The three phases of the ending of a story—climax, *dénouement* and conclusion—thus vary with the requirements of each individual story. Of the three, climax is unquestionably the most important. Usually, *dénouement* predominates over conclusion, the latter being a literary trimming, and often not vital

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to the composition of the story. Sometimes the writer may feel that a final touch of characterization is necessary, and will thus prolong the conclusion. In Eden Phillpott's story *The Rope*, a tale of a West-country hangman whose rope is stolen from him by the desperate wife of the man he is on his way to hang, in order to give the condemned man a day or two's grace, the climax —

“ ‘Hast heard the great news?’ ” she asked. But he had not, and so it happened that Tom West's wife was able to tell how another man — the chap by the name of Ned Rivers, a fellow-laborer with her husband — had come forward and made a clean breast, and confessed to the slaughter of the sheep,”

tells the reader all he wants to know, *i.e.*, that the innocent man was saved. No *dénouement* is necessary, but it is plain that the author feels we ought to have a final impression of the kindly philosophic hangman, and so we have the conclusion:

“ ’Twas a plot against my Tom,” she said. “ And the man went down to the prison yesterday at noon and gave himself up for the crime, because his fearful remorse after his sin had made him want to die. And my Tom will be free come tomorrow week! And ’twas me as saved his life after all, Hangman Merdle!”

“ And so you did, then,” admitted the executioner.

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“And nobody better pleased than me, I’m sure. How’s your babby?”

“He’s all right. And I’ve been allowed to see my husband and he’s terrible interested in it all, and will be very proud if you can come an’ drink a dish of tea along with us and a few neighbors next week.”

“Next week? No,” answered the other, handling his restored rope. “If what you tell me be true, I’m free to go on to Plymouth by this night’s coach. But when business calls me this way again I shall be very pleased to have a tell along with you and your chap. Let it be a lesson to us all to trust in God and our wives, ma’am!”

A typical use of climax, *dénouement* and conclusion is the final movement of O. Henry’s *Vanity and Some Sables* (a poor title, by the way). It is the story of “Kid” Brady, who has been reformed by his sweetheart Molly. Kid hates cheap things. After eight months “with no symptoms of backsliding” the Kid brings Molly a mysterious parcel. They are Russian sables, the real thing, he tells her, worth \$425. Molly, at first suspicious, calms her doubts. Sables are soothing. A detective follows them and arrests him on a charge of stealing a thousand-dollar set of sables from a house in West Seventh Street. Kid indignantly denies it, declares he bought them. The detective offers him a chance of proving his story by going to the place he bought them from.

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Confused, the Kid admits the theft. They meet Policeman Kohen; the detective signs to him for assistance. Then:

“Sure,” said Kohen, “I hear about those saples dat vas stolen. You say you have dem here?”

Policeman Kohen took the end of Molly’s late scarf in his hands and looked at it closely.

Beginning of
climax.

“Once,” he said, “I sold furs in Sixth Avenue. Yes, dese are saples. Dey come from Alaska. Dis scarf is vort twelve dollars and dis muff ——”

Climax.

“Biff,” came the palm of the Kid’s powerful hand upon the policeman’s mouth. Kohen staggered and rallied. Molly screamed. The detective threw himself upon Brady and with Kohen’s aid got the nippers on his wrist.

“The scarf is vort twelve dollars and the muff is vort nine dollars,” persisted the policeman. “Vot is dis talk of thousand dollars saples?”

The Kid sat upon a pile of lumber and his face turned dark red.

End of
climax.

“Correct, Solomonski,” he declared viciously. “I paid twenty-one dollars fifty for the set. I’d rather have got six months and not have told it.”

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Beginning of *dénouement*.
Explanation.

“Me, the swell guy that wouldn’t look at anything cheap! I’m a plain bluffer. Moll — my salary couldn’t spell sables in Russian.”

Molly cast herself upon his neck.

“What do I care for all the sables and money in the world?” she cried. “It’s my Kiddy I want. Oh, you dear, stuck-up, crazy blockhead!”

Finding of
“stolen” sables
the disclosure.

“You can take dose nippers off,” said Kohen to the detective. “Before I leaf de station de report come in dat de lady vind her saples — hanging in her wardrobe. Young man, I excuse you dat punch in my face — dis von time.”

End of *dénouement*.

Conclusion.

Ransom handed Molly her furs. Her eyes were smiling upon the Kid. She wound the scarf and threw the end over her left shoulder with a duchess’s grace.

(Note how the last two paragraphs “get rid” of the characters).

“A couple of young vools,” said Policeman Kohen to Ransom, “come on away.”

A type of story already referred to, in which climax, *dénouement* and conclusion are identical, is the surprise-ending story. A typical surprise-ending story is Michael Arlen’s amusing *The Luck of Cap-*

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tain Fortune. At a night club, a man and woman notice a "tall, dark young man whose dark eyes were wet with tears." Their curiosity is aroused, and they persuade the stranger to join their table and presently to tell his sad story. He begins: "My story concerns a man and a woman. The man loved the woman." He describes with emotion her rare beauty, charm and distinction, and her ambition. It was to shine in politics! She could speak divinely, but she simply could not prepare a speech. The man who loved her came to the rescue, wrote her speeches for her. "He was a man of ideas. He had a brain like Clapham Junction, going this way and that way, and every way at the same time; and he could, no doubt, have made a great political name for himself, but he was by nature a soldier, and by temperament adventurous, so that it pleased him infinitely more to 'help' the lady of his dreams to political fame rather than to bid for it in his own person."

"But another soldier came into her life — the most fearless soldier of our time, it has been said. But whether it was that he was the most fearless or the luckiest, we cannot tell. He himself insists on his luck. 'I cannot lose,' he is reported to have said, sometimes unhappily. Whatever he touched became a jewel in his hand; whatever he ventured, he won. A name never expressed a man more perfectly

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— Victor Fortune! Captain Fortune, V.C., D.S.O., M.C., etc. . . .”

With almost a sob of emotion the stranger describes how three weeks later “her old friend, her ‘helper,’ was stunned to read of the engagement of the lady to Captain Fortune, V.C., D.S.O., M.C., etc.” He was stunned; then frantically he rushed to her house. . . . She was very sorry about it all, she said. She was frightfully sorry. But she had fallen in love. Victor Fortune. . . .

“And so he went away, her friend, never to return. He never has returned. He never will return. And Captain Fortune married his lady, the lady of his dream. . . .”

The tears “smouldered in those dark eyes,” and they thought he was going to break down. “Of course,” he whispered, “she has never been able to make a speech since. How could she? Without her old friend she is just a lovely woman, a lovely woman whose life centers in her care for Captain Fortune. And her old friend has gone out of her life, he who loved her and still lives her, never to return, never. . . .”

Silently they watched him go. Then the *maître d’hôtel* chanced by their table. They asked who he was.

“That, Madam,” said the agreeable and polished

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M. Risotto, "is Captain Fortune, the most gallant gentleman in England. . . ."

No synopsis can do justice to the ingenuity of the surprise-ending.

O. Henry excels in this type of story, but his surprise-endings must be studied with care. He was a genius, and genius cannot be imitated. Imitations of O. Henry usually prove to be merely glorified anecdotes.

So many short stories end with a sting in their tail, that the beginner will do well to make a close study of this popular form. It is a type of story not difficult to write, but the handling of the ending is all-important. It must be dramatic, or, to use an Americanism, it must have "punch." This effect is best obtained in as few words as possible.

Restraint is vital in the handling of the ending. A word too much and pathos becomes bathos, tragedy becomes farce. I know of no better illustration in literature of the value of restraint than the dramatic simplicity of Thackeray's ending to a chapter of *Vanity Fair*:

"No more firing was heard at Brussels — the pursuit rolled miles away. Darkness came down on the field and city; and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart."

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The ending of a short story brings us back to the beginning. It is a new starting-point for the writer. The word *Finis* does not set the seal on his work. Revision is the next step—and a very important one, too.

A happy minority of authors are spared the necessity of revising their labors, but the number of stories that require no revision at all must be exceedingly small. The finished product nearly always differs slightly from the original conception. Stories have a knack of writing themselves. It is, in fact, a common occurrence for the writer to decide, while a story is in full swing, to recast it entirely. Points crop up as one goes along, one situation suggests another, characters refuse to be drawn in a certain way — and if the alteration be an improvement the story may have to be set on different lines. So that when the writer has satisfactorily disposed of the ending of his story, he must prepare to revise the whole in perhaps a new light.

Even when the story unfolds itself according to plan, a hundred and one little touches may be necessary to weld it into one artistic whole. The question of proportion, or balance, can never be satisfactorily decided until the actual writing is all complete. Deletions, omissions, condensation, expansion, for all of these the story must be carefully tested and adjusted.

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The natural anxiety of the writer to “get the thing finished” leads many beginners to plunge immediately into the work of revision. This, I think, is a mistake. If possible, the story should be put away and not looked at for several days at least. It is impossible to revise coolly and judiciously, while one is hot with the labor of writing the story. The MS. should be buried away for as long as possible, say ten days to a fortnight. (Needless to say this does not apply to stories which an editor has commissioned, and for which he may be waiting.) Then, and then only, should revision be begun.

This plan has the advantage of enabling the writer to view his own work with detachment. With any critical acumen at all he will be able to put his finger on the weak spots of a story. He will approach the story in the rôle of a reader, and should thereby be able to see more readily what finishing touches the MS. requires. The correction of mistakes, deletions here, compressions there, a word of explanation at this point, a descriptive touch at that, all will flow more smoothly from his pen as a result of the enforced interval between writing and revising.

Another excellent plan is reading aloud. I know of no more effective way of testing the smoothness of a story than this. The ear is alert to every harshness of phrase, awkwardness of construction and gaps

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in the texture of the story itself. It is, in fact, a severe test of the merit of a short story, and no opportunity should be lost of reading your efforts aloud to a discerning critic. Failing such a friend in need, fall back on yourself, and enlist the critical aid of your own hearing.

One word more: the much abused rejection slip, which may be all that your early efforts will reap, is really a friend in disguise. If all the "possible" markets for your story indicate a unanimous "No," then regard the formal printed slip as a signpost pointing to the story. Follow the trail and it will bring you to errors of commission or of omission. And the latter may be as important as the former. Don't say to yourself: "I can see nothing wrong with the story;" but ask yourself: "Is there anything *right* with it?"

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER

THE importance of "human interest" in the story has already been emphasized. And this interest reveals itself most prominently in the characters themselves. The reader is in some ways more interested in the characters than in what happens to them; at any rate, it would be true to say that the reader must believe in the characters and have sympathy with them before he can go on with the story. Even in that type of story which concerns itself least with character, *viz.*, the action-story, there must be sufficient plausibility and reality about the characters to justify their existence. At the other extreme, in stories which definitely exploit character as their theme, the problem of characterization becomes supremely important.

Character, as we have seen, may be created in a variety of ways, by description, suggestion, dialogue, and action. Of these the least effective is undoubtedly description. The reader will more readily judge people by what they say and do than by what is said about them by the writer. It must not be thought,

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however, that description is to be discarded altogether; used in conjunction with other methods it can be made very effective. Undoubtedly the reader likes to know what the characters look like; and a description of physical appearance may usefully convey a key to character.

Charles Dickens, although primarily a novelist, is an excellent model in this respect. His pen-picture of Mr. Squeers is illuminating:

“Mr. Squeers’ appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favor of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish-grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low protruding forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size; he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of scholastic black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.”

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Observe again how pregnant with the suggestion of character is this short descriptive paragraph from Leonard Merrick:

“The advertiser — who, it transpired, called himself Armytage — was evidently attired for the occasion. He wore a frock-coat, in combination with a summer waistcoat, much crumpled, and the trousers of a tweed suit. A garnet pin ornamented the wrong portion of a made-up tie.”

In a few strokes Leonard Merrick creates a living picture of the pseudo-genteel, shabby, rascally theatrical agent.

Mr. W. Clifford Poulten, the well-known critic, points an apt lesson from Thackeray. He says:

“Thackeray sketches Sir Pitt Crawley’s appearance, and some of his characters as well, in forty-two words:

. . . . a man in drab breeches and gaiters, and with a dirty old cravat, a foul old neckcloth lashed round his bristly neck, a shining bald head, a pair of twinkling gray eyes, and a mouth perpetually on the grin.

The man stands before us complete. The first portion of the passage points out the negative qualities: the man doesn’t worry about new clothes, or even to clean his old ones; to have such an intimate thing as a neckcloth washed, or to shave. All this might spring from carelessness, and produce an unpleasant effect without

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being morally repulsive; but then we get the statement that he leers, and that his mouth is perpetually 'on the grin.'

"The use of the word *grin* here, instead of *smile*, is almost as important as that of the word *beating* in Burke's* famous passage referring to the Angel of Death being abroad: 'I can almost hear the beating of his wings,' which it was observed would have immediately become ridiculous if he had said *flapping*. Study the interaction of one word upon another. A grin, and twinkling eyes, are by no means repellent characteristics; but when the grin is perpetual, the face is red and leering, and the whole is completed by a shining bald head above a foul neckcloth below, a definitely unpleasing effect is produced. We feel that we dislike Sir Pitt as thoroughly as if he had been introduced by a whole string of denunciatory adjectives; and we believe in him much more firmly than we should in the latter case."

So real is the pen-picture of Sir Pitt Crawley that it is quite conceivable he had his prototype in real life. The majority of authors draw unreservedly on real life for their characters. The young writer should assiduously practise the invaluable art of personal observation. Study all the varying types of humanity with whom you come in contact. Try to visualize their outlook on life; compare the philosophy of the tramp with that of the footman. Note the

* It was John Bright, not Burke.—M. J.

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differing conditions under which people live. Observe their clothes — an unfailing index to character — their habits, prejudices, and amusements. Note particularly how little concrete things reveal character — a cheap brooch, a monocle, a man's purse, a gold-topped stick, a *décolleté* dress, rouge and perfume, a button-hole, a celluloid collar, a ready-made bow tie — all such small details are invaluable in depicting characters and types.

This should be supplemented by continual practice in the even more important art of transferring mental impressions to paper. Observe continuously and thoroughly; neglect no material, however commonplace; and aim at creating a picture in writing when you come to record your observations. Write pen-pictures of your friends (secretly!); read your work critically; try to work yourself into a state of healthy dissatisfaction. For only by patient and continuous effort and the ruthless scrapping of poor work can this important branch of the writer's art be cultivated. Avoid *clichés* and hackneyed phrases at all costs. Try and express yourself distinctively, yet keep to a good plain style of writing. Avoid trite similes; don't describe someone "trembling like a leaf," or "eating like a hog," or "talking nineteen to the dozen." That is the sure way to miss the target.

Don't despise the classics. Read Chaucer's *Can-*

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terbury Tales, a masterpiece of characterization; the essays of Steele and Addison and the *Spectator* papers, which contain some of the first (and best) attempts to delineate character in prose, notably Sir Roger de Coverley. Shakespeare's plays are a gold mine; Balzac, Swift, Landor (*Imaginary Conversations*); and perhaps, above all, the Bible.

Don't be afraid to write in order to destroy. In the short story a whole descriptive essay will probably have to boil down to a single paragraph. Practise "cutting" your work, retaining only what is essential and significant. All this is invaluable preparation.

Of course, characters stand out in novels more than in short stories. In short stories the type that is remembered is usually one that recurs in a series, *e.g.*, Sherlock Holmes, Captain Kettle, Bindle, etc. Kipps, Mr. Polly, Mark Sabre, Uncle Toby and Dickens' and Thackeray's characters loom larger in our recollection than the miniature portraits of the short story.

The presentation of character in fiction is a very delicate process, comparable, perhaps, with the fine art of the etcher, of whom Seymour Haden has written: "every stroke he makes tells strongly against him if it be bad, or proves him to be a master if it be good. In no branch of art does a touch go for so much. The necessity for a rigid selection is therefore

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constantly present to his mind. If one stroke in the right place tell more for him than ten in the wrong, it would seem to follow that that single stroke is a more learned stroke than the scores of ten by which he would have arrived at his end."

What the etcher does with his needle the writer should try and do with his pen. But although the art of etching suggests a clear-cut line drawing in one color, the writer must not be afraid of using half-tones.

In the good old Lyceum melodrama the villain was always a deep-dyed scoundrel, the hero a man of unblemished virtue and courage, the heroine equally consistent throughout the piece; the characters were, so to speak, stamped black and white, good or bad. That is not the way to establish character in the short story. The reader will soon tire of mere puppets. The villain must have a motive to inspire him to acts of cunning or wickedness; his attitude must be understandable, at any rate. He must be a human being.

This may seem elementary advice; but of the thousands of MSS. which pass through any editor's hands, a substantial percentage deal with characters which are so colorless and devoid of reality that they might just as well have been labelled "Villain," "Hero," "Heroine," and so on. Probably the opti-

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mistic amateurs who bombard editors with these futile MSS. have in their own mind's eye some sort of conception of what their characters look like and how they behave, but it is quite certain that they fail completely in portraying them to the reader.

And yet the portrayal of character is so easy! At every turn of the story the writer is given an opening to reveal yet another glimpse of character. Dialogue, action, suggestion — every new development can be made to throw light on the people in the story. Every word they utter, every little thing they do, whether it be diving into a rushing river, or fidgeting nervously with a paper knife, can be made to serve the purpose of characterization.

Personal traits and mannerisms serve as useful identification marks. If your hero has a habit of stroking his chin meditatively, every time you introduce this gesture it enables the reader to visualize him quite plainly. Similarly individual mannerisms of speech may be repeated to enable the reader to identify a character; and all these little pictorial touches have a direct bearing on character.

Such gestures must be distinctive, and yet seem true to life. We have all met the man who bites off the end of his cigar, the woman who fumbles in her purse for something she can never find, the old gentleman who always polishes his spectacles before put-

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ting them on. It is quite a simple matter to transfer such real life characteristics to our fictional creations. On the other hand, the office boy who is always whistling and the self-conscious curate who precedes everything he says with "Ahem" are, so to speak, literary *clichés*, and should be avoided.

The process of presenting character, then, is a gradual one. Provided that the student realizes the way to set to work it should not be overwhelmingly difficult. There are a hundred and one opportunities which occur in the writing of a short story to enable the writer to distribute the little suggestive pictorial touches which are the whole art of conveying physical resemblance and character.

In a short story character should stand out in sharp relief. This applies especially to the leading personages of the story. This prominence is usually achieved by the contrast of one character with another, each one acting as a foil to the rest.

But it may be argued, character is a complex thing, much too vague and contradictory to be expressed in a single stroke. That is true; but for the purposes of the short story it is enough to stamp the character with one salient characteristic, stressing this trait throughout, and enabling the character to stand as the expression of this particular quality, good or bad: Thus one person may represent Cruelty, another De-

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votion, another Ambition, and so on. This is a modern and more subtle variation of the old Morality Plays. One well-known writer, in fact, is said to give his characters the names of such virtues and vices in order to assist in this process of embodiment; only deleting the labels and substituting names when the story reaches the revision stage.

Not in every short story is the contrast between character so sharp and distinct, but in the story that is professedly a study of character it is a very important aspect to consider. The more slender the plot, the more important does character become. In *The Portrait of a Coward*, by Leonard Merrick, the plot, slight in itself, is subordinated to the main purpose of revealing character. Leonard Merrick portrays a woman who, as a girl, was married against her will to a man with two daughters. When he died she was glad but dared not show it. Year by year, she and her stepdaughters (who grow up into odious prigs) go to the cemetery to lay flowers on his grave. The poor woman is overawed by their sanctimonious piety and dares not protest against the hypocrisy of her own grief. Her only hope is that the girls may get married. But they are plain and unattractive and refuse to go out anywhere. At last the doctor orders them away to the seaside and the poor woman breathes a hope that they may meet someone and

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make an attachment; for her it means Freedom. But the unexpected happens. Romance enters not their life, but hers. A man falls in love with her, and she with him. Presently she promises to marry him. But she must go home with the girls to “settle things” and break the news. And when it comes to the point she cannot. She tells them of the proposal.

“Oh . . . after you had gone from Harrogate, Mr. Murray asked me to marry him.”

The silence seemed to her to last for minutes.

“To do *what?*” gasped Amy.

“Well,” exclaimed Mildred, “it didn’t take long to put *him* in his place, I hope. What impudence!”

“He had an impudent look,” said Amy.

And then later:

After breakfast, when the beds were being made, Mrs. Findon said: “Doreen, if anybody calls this morning — a gentleman — say we’re away from home for a few days. You understand? For a few days — all of us. Oh, and Doreen, if he asks where we are you don’t know.”

And finally, Merrick’s bitterly ironic ending:

For each Sunday she goes with the Misses Findon to gaze upon the grave; and on their return while the Misses Findon sit by the fireplace, speaking at long intervals, in subdued tones, their stepmother stares from the window, knowing that her pretence of mourn-

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ing a husband will continue as long as she lives. And when she looks back on her romance, she marvels — not at the recreancy of her submission, but that once she briefly dared to dream she would rebel.

Every young writer with any inclination towards stories of character should read this story. The contrast between the pathetic figure of the woman who was a coward and the two mean-spirited, selfish and obstinate daughters is drawn by a master hand. The whole picture is *real*, thanks in no small part to the brilliant delineation of character.

The writer who wishes to excel in the portrayal of character must be a keen observer of human nature. There is an abundance of material to select from, perhaps too much. Very often the beginner cannot see the wood for the trees. There are two kinds of characters, real and imaginary. Both should be studied, but the former with caution. Although it is no doubt the practice of many authors to derive characters from real life, the complete and faithful portrayal of a living person in fiction is rendered almost impracticable by the very nature and limitations of fiction. Nevertheless, fiction does derive its inspiration from life itself, and to a very large extent the writer is dependent on his observation of living people when he sets out to depict characters in a story. Just as an entertainer on the stage will mimic

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easily recognizable types of men and women, so may the writer people his stories with individual types.

The truly enormous quantity of fiction that has already been written will also provide the student with a fruitful source of inspiration. In the creation of types many modern writers owe a great debt (perhaps unconsciously) to the creations of other authors. W. J. Locke's Aristide Pujol is a modern and Gallic Mark Tapley; Stephen McKenna's Sonia owes something to Becky Sharp; Bindle might have stepped from the pages of Charles Dickens.

But it is perhaps in the method of presentation that the young writer may most profitably study the work of others.

In addition to physical description, character may be revealed in dialogue (see the next chapter on Dialogue, page 112) or action. Just as in real life people are judged by what they say and do, so in fiction the reader unconsciously bases his estimate of a character on his speech and actions. It is therefore important to bear in mind that every word uttered and every action performed by a major character reflects directly on the character itself.

One of the privileges of the writer is to express the thoughts of his characters. Perhaps thought even more than speech provides a strong clue to character. Sentences which begin "Now he realized . . .", "He

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began to wonder whether . . .”, “His thoughts travelled to . . .”, “She hesitated whether to tell . . .” are typical sentence forms which directly assist in throwing light on character.

“Actions speak louder than words” is a proverb which applies to the revelation of character. You may describe a man as being honorable and loyal, but the reader won’t believe you if he robs his friend and deserts his wife. It should be obvious that what your characters *do* must be in harmony with what they say, and with what you, as the writer, say about them.

How many characters should a short story contain? This naturally depends upon the length and scope of the story and the requirements of the plot. If you have gone plot hunting on the right lines you should not have an unduly large or small number of characters. Generally speaking, the number should be restricted as far as possible. Two or three main characters should be enough. A certain number of minor characters—“supers”—are often necessary to the story, but they should be kept strictly in the background. As on the stage the limelight is thrown on the leading actors, to the exclusion of the minor characters, servants, messengers, and so on, so in the short story the reader’s attention should not be allowed to wander from the protagonists of the story.

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Sometimes when writing a story a certain character takes the writer's fancy and he is tempted to develop it at the expense of more important characters. It might be the heroine's sister, a young schoolgirl, who has some amusing things to say. This temptation should be ruthlessly overcome. Characters must be kept in their places. This is the time to recall the cynical advice of the critic who said "If a thing particularly pleases you, *have it out.*"

Naming characters is quite a fascinating pastime. Needless to say, names have to be chosen with great care, for there is a good deal in a name, in spite of Shakespeare. Certain names have a strong suggestion of character about them; Martha suggests the dutiful housewife; Dolly, Betty or Kitty, the rather frivolous young lady; John, the strong, silent man; Tom, the honest, straightforward son of the people; Grace, the quiet, unassuming girl; Basil, Rupert or Eric, the gay, light-hearted youngster; Claude, Algonon or Cuthbert, the dandy; Henry, the henpecked husband; Philip, the earnest student; Marcus, the substantial man of business; Jake, Jasper, Sebastian, the villain of the piece; these can be multiplied indefinitely. The psychological influence of names is, therefore, very important. Naming characters, however, does not as a rule present many difficulties even to the beginner.

CHAPTER V

DIALOGUE

“WHAT is the use of a book,” complained Alice in Wonderland, “without conversation in it?”

Conversation or dialogue of some kind is necessary to most stories, and this branch of short story writing deserves close study. A page of dialogue is attractive to the editorial eye. But dialogue must not be introduced into a story without a definite purpose. Passages of writing between quotation marks do not in themselves constitute dialogue. Dialogue serves various purposes; it reveals character, conveys both setting and information, accelerates the action, and gives a realistic effect to the story as a whole.

Dialogue thus serves three main purposes:

(1) TO REVEAL CHARACTER

Character is best revealed by dialogue. (See page 109, chapter on Character.) An anonymous writer once said: “It is not necessary to say that a woman is a snarling, grumpy person. Bring in the old lady and let her snarl.” Speech is human interest, and human interest sells stories. Every word uttered by a leading character must be significant, and help to

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strengthen the reader's impression of the character. The minor characters may talk more or less alike, but the speech of the leading actors in the fiction drama must be individual. Not a syllable should be wasted.

Having made up your mind about your characters, and having determined their various qualities — ambition — avarice — fear — devotion — perseverance — and so on, you must set out, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, to express these qualities in the words you put into their mouths.

Thus you will create the personality of your characters in the most effective way, *i.e.*, by dialogue. The reader should be able to identify a character the moment he or she reappears in the story. To obtain this effect, dialogue must — so to speak — be on different levels. The individuality of dialogue is nowhere better illustrated than in the works of Charles Dickens. Mr. Pecksniff, for example, never says anything that could be confused with the speech of other participants in the dialogue. The speech of Micawber, Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp, serves in each instance as a clearly distinctive label. This is the effect to aim at.

Within the limited scope of the short story this, I admit, becomes very difficult. Where practically every word must carry its own meaning, it is no easy matter to paint in the little characteristic touches that

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mean so much. We cannot all be Kiplings or Ben-
netts; but if we appreciate the importance of dialogue
and make a serious attempt to fulfil its proper func-
tion, there is no doubt that we shall be working on
the right lines.

Note, for instance, how skillfully the greed of
Ameera's mother and the grief of John Holden are
conveyed by dialogue in this passage from Kipling's
Without Benefit of Clergy:

“Is she dead, Sahib?”

“She is dead.”

“Then I will mourn, and afterwards take an inven-
tory of the furniture in this house. For that will be
mine. The sahib does not mean to resume it? It is
so little, so very little, Sahib, and I am an old woman.
I would like to lie softly.”

“For the mercy of God be silent a while. Go out
and mourn where I cannot hear.”

“Sahib, she will be buried in four hours.”

“I know the custom. I shall go ere she is taken
away. That matter is in thy hands. Look to it that
the bed on which — on which she lies ——”

“Aha! That beautiful red-lacquered bed. I have
long desired ——”

“That the bed is left here untouched for my dis-
posal. All else in the house is thine. Hire a cart,
take everything, go hence, and before sunrise let there
be nothing in this house but that which I have ordered
thee to respect.”

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"I am an old woman. I would stay at least for the days of mourning, and the rains have just broken. Whither shall I go?"

"What is that to me? My order is that there is a going. The house gear is worth a thousand rupees, and my orderly shall bring thee a hundred rupees tonight."

"That is very little. Think of the cart-hire."

"It shall be nothing unless thou goest, and with speed. O woman, get hence, and leave me with my dead!"

To take a few elementary instances, let us suppose that we want to present characters as being variously *Cowardly, Ambitious, Namby-Pamby, Callous, etc.*
COWARDLY.

"Take care!" cried the old man. "They say that old Martin's ghost haunts that passage." He peered nervously over Jim's shoulder. "If you must — what's that? That white shape — look! Oh, God, have mercy ——"

The abrupt, dislocated dialogue imparts the desired emotional effect.

NAMBY-PAMBY.

"Oh, rather," said Algy. "A gel always notices a chap's clothes, what? Ties and socks to match, and all that sort of thing, doncher know. Oh, rather!"

CALLOUS.

"You will do as I tell you," said Brewster

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calmly. “When you come back with the money I will listen to you. Until then ——” He shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

“But — but the police? And my sister — what will she do?”

“That is your affair. I have nothing to add to what I have already said.”

The calm, dispassionate words contrast with the broken, incoherent utterances of the other.

Dialogue should, in this way, match and blend with the personalities you wish to express in your writing.

This feature of short story writing is entirely modern. Dialogue in the historical romances of Scott, the stories of Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe, and the older school of short story writers is curiously artificial. All the characters speak on the same level, no attempt being made to delineate character by means of dialogue.

But, you may object, where can I find a better model than Stevenson?

For style, narrative, vocabulary, I agree; but not for dialogue. If the title and characters' names of, say, *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* were changed, and the story submitted as an original MS. to a magazine editor who happened not to have read R. L. Stevenson's famous story, I doubt very much whether it would be accepted. It is an excellent story, but it

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does not conform to modern magazine standards. The dialogue in itself “dates” it, and puts it out of court.

The recent development of the short story appears to be bringing character into greater prominence. Thus, fiction in which dialogue had a direct bearing on events is giving place to fiction in which dialogue helps in revealing character. This, then, is one of the main purposes of modern dialogue.

A frequent, but less important, object of dialogue is:

(2) TO CONVEY SETTING

Describing the setting by means of dialogue needs little explanation.

By revealing its effects on the character, additional realism is imparted to the description of scenery or background. Thus in a story by W. W. Jacobs:

“I like this place,” said she, breaking a long silence. “It is so dismal — so uncanny. Do you know, I wouldn’t dare to sit here alone, Jem. I should imagine that all sorts of dreadful things were hidden behind the bushes and trees, waiting to spring out on me. Ugh!”

In the same way basic information necessary to the story’s development may be conveyed to the reader through the mouths of the characters.

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The third object of dialogue is:

(3) TO CARRY ON OR ACCELERATE THE ACTION

This is a typical use of dialogue, and the majority of short stories contain several examples. To take an instance almost at random:

“Throw a stone down, sergeant. I want to judge how deep it is,” he ordered.

When it is necessary to increase the speed of the action, succinct dialogue will often come to the writer's assistance.

Dialogue is one of those things easy to grasp in theory, but difficult to apply in practice. Always assuming that it is not worth while trying to write fiction unless one *can* write, or *wants* to write, the best advice I can give the beginner is to study closely the methods of the best writers. First, as a reader in order to judge the effect; then, more critically and analytically, as a student.

Read W. W. Jacobs, whose dialogue is a model. Jacobs is the literary equivalent of Phil May, who, when he had finished a drawing, went over it with scrupulous care and rubbed out every line that was not absolutely indispensable. W. W. Jacobs' stories are like that; his economy in words is the delight of every writer who appreciates craftsmanship. Other

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authors to study for the use of dialogue are: Anthony Hope (*The Dolly Dialogues*), E. F. Benson (*Dodo, Miss Mapp, Queen Lucia*, especially), "Saki" (H. H. Munro), Owen Oliver, Leonard Merrick, O. Henry, Jack London and A. A. Milne.

Conversation in fiction must appear real and true to life, although it is as a matter of fact anything but strictly true to life. The faithful reproduction of ordinary human speech would appear ridiculous on the printed page. (See Chapter I, page 14.) One cannot repeat too often that art is a continuous process of selection. The dialogue of fiction is the result of drastic boiling down of ordinary speech. Only what is significant may remain; all the innumerable irrelevances, repetitions, ejaculations, grammatical errors and meaningless phrases must be pruned away before dialogue can be written down. I find it very hard to make some young writers believe this, but fortunately something happened recently which should convince all "realistic" sceptics.

A certain local alderman complained of the unfair treatment of a newspaper which "edited" his speeches. The newspaper took a neat revenge by reproducing his next speech exactly as he delivered it, omitting nothing, and faithfully transferring into print all the "ums" and "ers" and incoherencies and errors! If, then, a prepared speech can be

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made to appear absurd, what about spontaneous conversation?

Many people seem to find dialogue hard to write. To some writers fresh sparkling dialogue comes naturally; others strive laboriously only to produce stodge. Dialogue must be spontaneous to be successful. Therefore, revision is not desirable. If your dialogue does not develop naturally, scrap it and begin again.

To any writer whose dialogue is his weak point, I recommend the plan of inventing imaginary conversations between well-known characters in fiction. The characterization is, so to speak, ready-made; it only remains to put appropriate and characteristic remarks in their mouths.

Invent, say, discussions between Kipps and Mr. Micawber, Captain Kettle and Raffles, Bindle and the Night Watchman. Don't merely imitate their manner of utterances; try and get at things from their different points of view.

Study your character's outlook on life, and you will have discovered the royal road to expressing his thoughts in dialogue. As a mere literary exercise, too, this procedure has the advantage of making your style more supple.

Another plan to improve your dialogue is to take any short story which lends itself to the purpose, and

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rewrite it entirely in dialogue, *i.e.*, convert it into a one-act play (which is the dramatic form the short story most closely resembles). Many of O. Henry's stories are suitable for this useful literary exercise. It is not necessary to transform a whole story in this way. Take as many passages as you can and rewrite them in dialogue form. This exercise will improve your writing, and also impart elasticity to your dialogue.

The acid test of dialogue is *Put yourself in his place*. You, as the writer, clearly visualize your characters. Therefore, when writing down their speech you must become each in turn, seeing things from each individual point of view and talking naturally as you would expect them to talk. In a crisis, speech naturally becomes sharp, staccato, sometimes incoherent; over the walnuts and wine, dialogue is leisurely, more polished.

Don't try and obtain sympathy for your hero and heroine by giving them all the pleasant things to say, and only putting imprecations and surly abuse in the mouth of your villain. Let him be like "Mr. Wu," have a good case and argue it eloquently.

Dialogue is an excellent means of condensation. Instead of writing "Unless you leave the town tonight," *he said, with a threatening air*, simply say "Unless you leave the town tonight," *he threatened*.

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This brings us to the problem of the eternal “he said” and “she said.” Avoidance of the perfect tense of the verb “to say” has become almost a fetish. Some writers never use this poor abused verb at all, which I think is a mistake. But there is no doubt that the constant repetition of “he said” and “she said” is deadly monotonous. Substitutes are innumerable: such verbs as:

asked	groaned	continued
demanded	hesitated	went on
blurted	murmured	expostulated
sneered	put in	frowned
stammered	replied	suggested
answered	retorted	wondered
acquiesced	inquired	urged
declared	ejaculated	nodded
gasped	returned	agreed
cried	uttered	explained
demurred	whispered	hinted
faltered	breathed	laughed

will readily occur to the writer. Considerable advantage may be taken also of the additional shades of meaning thus supplied.

The vexed question of dialect deserves some consideration. The golden rule is a negative one; don't attempt the use of any form of dialect with which you

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are not thoroughly familiar. And even then, be careful not to overdo it. As one critic has said, the short story that requires a glossary will go down to posterity in manuscript form. Life is too short nowadays to unravel the intricacies of an unfamiliar dialect. Some forms, however, are acceptable, but it will be noted that they are usually recognized dialects, *e.g.*, Yorkshire, Cockney, West Country, Irish, Scotch, and even then are carefully diluted to make them thoroughly intelligible to the average reader. It is, incidentally, a waste of effort to try and commit dialect to paper with unswerving fidelity. The thing cannot be done. The best plan is to reproduce as dialect only a few outstanding characteristics of phrase and turns of speech, and write the rest in ordinary English. This will be quite sufficient to give the desired effect.

The reproduction of a foreign idiom can be handled in two ways, either by scattering italicized phrases in the language itself, to give it a flavor as it were; this, however, should be done with great care; such phrases as “*n'est-ce pas?*” “*eh bien,*” “*alors*” “*tiens,*” etc., seem to have a strange fascination for anyone ignorant of French. They should never be used by anyone uncertain of their exact meaning. Nothing destroys the illusion so quickly as the wrong use or mis-spelling of another language with which

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the reader may be intimately acquainted. The other and better way, in my opinion, to express foreign construction and idiom is in English words. Leonard Merrick, whose short stories of the cafés and boulevards of Paris should be read by every young writer, excels in this method of presentation. Here is an illustration from a story by W. B. Maxwell (*A German in the Village*),*

“Battalion headquarters is here, at Emile Veuillot’s — that is me, my lieutenant. Your colonel’s mess is opposite — at Monsieur Achille Nodier’s. You will be well there. It is the best house. Your quartermaster’s stores? Go forward. You are at Madame Binet’s. Your transport will enter those fields behind the school. Stop not those wagons. Let them go forward down the hill to the first corner. Hold, my captain, one platoon this way, into the barn.”

When to use dialogue, is the problem that usually confronts the beginner.

Generalizations are useless; it all depends on the circumstances of the story in making. It is, I am sure, largely a matter of instinct with most good writers. Provided that the general principles are understood and that the various purposes of dialogue are borne in mind, it should not be difficult to decide

* From *The Great Interruption*.

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the point. The writer should always bear in mind the three main objects of dialogue:

(1) To reveal character; (2) to convey setting or information, and (3) to accelerate or carry on the action. Very often dialogue may be utilized for more than one purpose at the same time, so urgent is the necessity for compression in the short story.

CHAPTER VI

STYLE

MANNERS may make the man, but style does not make an author. It is of not much use being able to say a thing well if one hasn't anything good to say. There is no individuality of style without individuality of thought. As far as the writer of fiction is concerned, style is not nearly so important as people imagine. There are at least a dozen very well known contributors to the magazines who habitually violate the rules of grammar, syntax and many other laws of literary composition. This probably does not arise from ignorance, but from sheer carelessness. It is indefensible, but it is quite true. I mention this, not in order that their example shall be followed (it is scarcely necessary to point out that their work is accepted in spite of such errors), but to show that the literary stylist has no advantage when writing magazine fiction. In fact I think that a polished style is rather a drawback. It needs living up to. The exquisite prose of Max Beerbohm needs (and fortunately has) a delicate imagination and a fine perception to match. For the rough and tumble fiction of

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the monthly magazines, all that is needed is a vigorous straightforward "story-telling" style.

Style is the expression of the writer's personality in words. Certain authors have the gift of impressing their personality on all they write. Leonard Merrick and Stacy Aumonier have this indefinable gift to a conspicuous degree. That it is a gift cannot be denied. Yet the young writer may profitably study their style and that of many other authors, noting particularly the uncommon use of ordinary words, sentence forms, the use of inversions, the introduction of dialogue, the general spirit of their stories. Many a beginner has thus learned at least one useful trick of the trade, to write "in the grand manner."

Style is, or should be, an unconscious growth. Consciously trying to acquire literary style is fatal. Only by the indirect method of soaking oneself in literature can a pleasing style be developed.

J. Berg. Esenwein, editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, says:

"'Reading maketh a full man,' said much-quoted Bacon; but it depends upon the reader as to what he will be full of — other men's ideas, or a dynamic store of fact and fancy. Writers do not read too much; they digest too little. A prodigious diet of reading, assimilated into brain and heart, cannot but be of vast

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assistance in all future creation. But to be the slavish imitator of those whom you read, is the sign-manual of inferiority."

Vocabulary should be increased day by day. Reading — and yet more reading — will accomplish this. A careful study of even only a few good stories will yield rich results. In this connection it is advisable to study the work of only first-class writers.

English is a "woolly" language, and the hundreds of clusters of words which group round one meaning necessitate a nice discrimination in their use. The need for a good dictionary is obvious. A book which I cordially recommend to all aspiring writers is Roget's *Thesaurus*. It is an excellent guide to the "right word" and is much more elastic than the ordinary dictionary of synonyms.

Essay writing is valuable for teaching the logical sequence of sentences, and the rhythm of prose. Another good plan to improve the sense of prose rhythm is to read good modern poetry, *e.g.*, Alfred Noyes, Sir William Watson and Rupert Brooke. Perhaps it is this important quality of rhythm that makes certain authors' work so readable. Harsh and unmusical prose — unless used as a deliberate device — jars on the reader, and sometimes breaks the thread of interest altogether. Sentences must be nicely balanced and proportioned in fiction as well as

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essays. The only remedy for the student who finds constant difficulty in expressing himself smoothly and fluently, is to take a self-instruction course in English composition. He should write as much as possible; write letters, keep a diary, aiming always at acquiring facility of expression. Style will take care of itself.

For the foundation of a good literary style there is no better model in the world than the Bible. Let anyone who doubts the merit of simplicity in writing, re-read the stories of the Old Testament and the Parables of the New. They are a revelation in style.

Without any straining after effect, the simple language is not only uniformly beautiful, but holds the reader's attention throughout. Arlo Bates, in *Talks on Writing English*, says of a passage in Marie Corelli's novel *Barabbas*:

“Water having been brought, Pilate, according to Miss Corelli, thus proceeded:

‘Slowly lowering his hands he dipped them in the shining bowl, rinsing them over and over again in the clear, cold element, which sparkled in its polished receptacle like an opal against the fire.’

“The Bible finds it possible to say all of this that is necessary in the words:

‘Pilate took water, and washed his hands.’”

The Bible is an object lesson in the use of English

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and the value of compression, and in the short story we have seen that compression is not only desirable, but necessary.

Never use two words where one will do. Don't use a long word where a short one will suffice. Circumlocution is a deadly sin; don't write "in an intoxicated condition" when you mean "drunk." Strip your writing of all superfluous words. Study, in addition to the Bible, the stories of Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry and R. L. Stevenson, the three great masters in literary economy. Don't model your style on Henry James, whose work is admired not because his style is involved, but in spite of it.

A. S. M. Hutchinson, describing the evening exodus of girls from city offices, lets himself go as follows:

"They all are wonderful. There is, as out they come, and shining home they go, no man they pass — not all your servants or your laurelled — can of his powers give to weariness what of their graces these can give; can of his brain or of his hands bequeath mankind what of their these, its mothers foreordained, maintaining it bequeath it. All lovely, all wonderful; and loveliest and wondrous most that one, as often I have seen, who to a lover waiting there emerges, and goes to him and amidst all the thronging crowds, raises her face to him and kisses him, and takes his arm and turns along the crowded streets with him; and lo, no

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longer crowded, fretful, anxious are that lover's ways,
but Paradise."*

This is the kind of thing to avoid. Only an established "best-seller" may indulge in such verbal fantasy and flourish. In justice to the author of *If Winter Comes* it must be said that the whimsical theme of the story does justify light and fantastic treatment, but surely not to the extent of the barbarous paragraph above.

Style in fiction should not be as characteristic as, say, handwriting. It must be kept in its proper place, subordinate to the main purpose of "telling a story." The matter of the story deserves more attention than the manner of telling it.

Every writer passes through a period of style-forming influence. Many celebrated authors have openly acknowledged their debt in this respect to the classics. The wisdom of studying the work of classic writers as a preparation for modern journalism is analogous to the now established theory that a study of Latin is the best foundation for a knowledge of English, French and Italian. As a foundation only—not as a model to be imitated. Language is always susceptible to the passing of time and changes of habits.

The young writer who slavishly models his style on

* From *The Eighth Wonder*.

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even such accomplished stylists as Carlyle, Borrow or Bacon is going to make no headway with magazine editors. This may seem a reflection on magazine editors, but it is their job to supply the public with what they want, and, from a practical point of view, the young writer should recognize this law of supply and demand.

Study must be intelligent, fundamental principles understood and appreciated, and the student may browse through the vast literary fields with incalculable benefit to his own productions. Above all else, his taste should be catholic, and his reading *creative*.

The writer's style should harmonize with the general tone of the story. A whimsical theme demands a delicate touch, a dramatic story is best told in a vigorous style. Slang and colloquialisms are sometimes in keeping with the spirit of the story, and should not be despised. *Clichés*, platitudes and "journallese" should be avoided. Never degenerate into jargon; remember the babu's report of his mother's death, "Regret to inform you the hand that rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket." But a good plain style does not mean a commonplace style. Cultivate an original turn of phrase; coin similes for your own use. Jot down in a notebook any interesting scrap of information that may be turned to literary account. For instance, a writer recently stated

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that in Turkey old maids are practically unknown. A new simile at once suggests itself for use when required — “As rare as old maids in Turkey.”

At the same time, don't allow your work to become overrun with flowers of speech in an effort to avoid the commonplace. In fact, the efforts of many inexperienced writers would be improved by a drastic weeding-out of flowery phrases.

Writing merely for effect is fatal. Striking turns of phrase, epigrams, witticisms and ingenious metaphors and similes are appreciated at proper intervals and in reasonable quantity. Man cannot live by cake alone. Don't drag in jokes, or worse — puns. A recent magazine story contains this passage:

“Under the wall of the chief hotel a group of licensed mendicants thrust maimed limbs into the faces of the passers-by, mouthing their demands of ‘One pen for bread.’

“‘Listen to 'em,’ muttered Gardiner. ‘What d’ye think of a country that allows that sort of thing?’

“‘That, friend Gardiner,’ returned Rumens, ‘is the Madeira whine we’ve heard so much about.’”

A good joke, but a bad practice for a story writer. Generally speaking, fiction unadorned with extraneous humor is adorned the most.

Beware, too, of overdoing the use of dots, dashes, commas, asterisks, exclamation marks and other

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punctuation devices. Nothing is more irritating to a sensitive reader than a plague of dots. To him they represent gaps not in the story, but in the writer's mentality.

Good style does not mean the language of the purist. Split infinitives, the ending of sentences with prepositions, and many other literary peccadilloes which cause the academic-minded to shudder, are honored in the breach in fiction. It must not be thought, however, that a good style is to be deprecated. A stylish batsman may make a smaller score in an inning than the unpolished hitter, but in the long run the positions will be reversed, because the principles of style are sound. The important thing to remember is that style should not be deliberately cultivated. Creative reading is the great secret. The successful author, reviewing his career, usually has to admit that his style, like Topsy, has "grow'd."

CHAPTER VII

LOCAL COLOR AND SOME TYPES OF SHORT STORY

THE greatest mistake an inexperienced writer can make is to choose for a story a setting about which he knows nothing. A clerk living in a suburb is tempting Providence by producing a story of Alaskan snows or the Egyptian desert. The editor who reads the MS. may never have been there either, but editors have an uncanny knack of penetrating the accuracy of local color. Omniscience in these matters seems to be a peculiar editorial gift. It is, therefore, sound policy to confine first efforts at short story writing to settings with which one is familiar. There is plenty of interesting material in everyone's life, however commonplace it may appear at first sight.

Jack London once said that any man with a tattoo-mark on the back of his hand or on his forearm was worth following for a romance. O. Henry asserted that it would be impossible to knock at any house door and say to the first person who appeared: "Fly! All has been discovered!" and not get a story.

Romance, pathos, humor, adventure, and tragedy are everywhere. O. Henry found them in the "Four

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Million ” of New York; Arthur Morrison in the East End of London.

Stories of ordinary, everyday people, suburbs, office life, industry, soldiering, country life, shops, restaurants, railways, schools—all have their market.

At the same time I must admit that many writers have built up a reputation (consolidated by useful checks) by writing of places and people which are purely the products of imagination, aided probably by a little careful study of books of travel or another writer's stories dealing with the same surroundings. One at least of our popular “Eastern ” novelists has only visited Egypt once in her life, and that after her proceeds from successful Egyptian novels enabled her to do so. The comment is not intended to be disparaging; in fact, I think all the more credit is due to the writer in question. Imagination is a wonderful gift, and it varies in an amazing degree. By dint of imagination some writers can produce stories of remote climes which are convincing in their realism. But this gift of just striking the right note belongs to a small minority, and, generally speaking, young writers should avoid what is a dangerous practice.

At the same time realism does not necessarily imply literal accuracy.* The Rhodesian novels of

* See page 17.

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the late Gertrude Page are extraordinarily realistic, but with all respect to the memory of this gifted author, no one who has lived in modern Rhodesia would accept her books as faithful presentations of Rhodesian life and conditions.

It is quite sufficient to make a special study of a place or of certain types of people. It is not necessary to have actually lived in the locality or to have been on intimate terms with the people you are going to use as material for a story.

In this respect enterprise gets its own reward. In fiction as in most walks of life, specialization pays.

A young writer came to me not long ago with an idea for a story. The plot hinged on a famous oil painting. He explained that it was necessary to the story to describe the inspection of the picture by a group of art critics. Unfortunately, he hadn't the slightest idea how to put this down on paper. Like the famous old lady, he didn't know much about art. Where the technical side was concerned he admitted — very sensibly — that he was out of his depth. The advice I gave him was to turn up certain newspaper files of the last Royal Academy and to consult the critics' articles which always appear at considerable length at that time of the year. He took the advice and easily gleaned enough material to make his critics' remarks seem true to life.

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It cannot be over-emphasized that this “seeming true to life” is the goal to be aimed at. Not real life as it is but as it is popularly supposed to be. W. W. Jacobs’s sailormen are not real sailors, but better still, they are what the public imagine them to be. There is all the difference in the world between what is *convincing* in fiction and what is true.

One popular novelist is at present specializing in hunting stories. So cleverly is the local color painted in that few people suspect that the writer’s personal experience of hunting is very limited and that all the picturesque phraseology and technical detail of the hunt were supplied by another writer! What does it matter? The stories entertain and the hunting atmosphere seems true to life.

The problem of what to write about is, of course, nearly always solved by the plot. Once the plot has crystallized into being the setting of the story is decided as a matter of course. But not always. For instance, a War Story plot — still unpopular with editors five years after the Great War! — must be adapted to another setting:

A child about eleven years old adores her father. The Great War takes him away and she dimly realizes what war means. Without him she is desperately lonely. The doll which he gave her is her sole companion. Presently he is invalided home with gas

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poisoning and she sees him die in agony. An intense hatred for the Germans who killed him takes possession of her. Grief-stricken, she turns to her beloved doll for consolation. One day, combing her doll's hair, she finds the words "Made in Germany." It dawns on her that the doll may have been — was — made by the German who killed her Daddy. That night she is found lying by the side of the shattered doll.

This plot would probably be marketable if remoulded on different lines. A Serbian dollmaker, the little daughter of a Bulgarian peasant, his death at the hands of a Serbian raiding party and her sacrifice of the cherished doll — something on these lines would undoubtedly make the plot more acceptable under current conditions.

Stories in which character predominates need careful handling of "local color." In such stories the reader travels at a more leisurely pace, is more critical of detail. But do not imagine that having described the background of a story you can go ahead with your mind at rest as far as local color is concerned. Fictional pictures are not created by a clumsy daub, and then — finish. The scene must be built up carefully and subtly. You may, of course, begin with a paragraph of scenic description; but be careful not to overdo it. And this does not absolve you from the subsequent building-up process.

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Two great principles, apparently in direct opposition to each other, govern the construction of a short story; on the one hand a rigid condensation to the skeleton of the action, and on the other the insertion of numerous scraps of matter to create atmosphere, character, and generally to achieve conviction. The clever balancing of these two opposed principles is craftsmanship. To the reader action and atmosphere must appear inseparable, each dependent on the other for its effect.

Here are a few instances to show how local color is deftly woven into the body of the story:

“Bud gazed impartially at the water-jar hanging on the gallery and chewed a mesquite leaf. For miles they had ridden in silence save for the soft drum of the ponies’ hoofs on the matted mesquite grass. . . .”
— O. HENRY.

“Why, he said to himself as he walked out into the nightly crowd of Chinese, Indians, Burmans, buffalo carts, rickshaws, gharries, motor-cars, all seething through the wide white lighted streets of Rangoon — why should he not manage to get the treasure after all?” — BEATRICE GRIMSHAW.

“He was sitting at a paper-strewn table in his library, a decorous library, a gentleman’s library, lined from floor to ceiling with bookcases filled with books that no gentleman’s library should be without, and trying to solve the eternal problem why two and two should not make forty, when the butler entered announcing the doctor.” — W. J. LOCKE.

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“Beddington, wading knee-deep in the scrub . . . And now as he lay on the flower-starred turf, his back against the sun-warmed rock, he grew increasingly confident that this humble expedition was destined to serve its purpose with equal success.”—LUCAS MALET.

Observe with what seemingly careless skill the local color is touched in. These random examples may be indefinitely multiplied by the student's own reading. The lesson is plain; local color is most effectively pictured by being skillfully sandwiched in the body of the story. After all, local color is only a minor theme and should be treated accordingly.

The five senses — sight, touch, hearing, taste, smelling — are the means by which the writer obtains atmosphere. Of these, sight and hearing are the most widely used, but the others should not be overlooked. Smell, for instance, is very suggestive. The fragrance of the wood, the salt sea breeze, the acrid smell of gunpowder, the appetizing smell of cooking bacon, the aroma of burning tobacco — all these may be pressed into service with excellent results. Atmosphere may by this means be conveyed in that subtle indirect way which is the essence of craftsmanship. It is unnecessary, for instance, to interrupt the action of the story to state directly that “The sea breeze blew in his face.” Why not, “Jimmy, sniffing the sea breeze, made his way . . .” etc.?

Note how the effects are obtained in the following

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colorful passage from a short story by John Russell.*

“Henry of Vitongo was a born pagan. . . . He loved the equal days and the long, long moonlit nights that pass to merriment and choric song, the droning organ of the reef and the cymballing of the palm-fronds. He loved every impact that set him in his ordained environment — the salted lash of spray, driving wind, and rain like hammers from the sky; the breath-taking, bubble-poised send of a frail canoe; the cleaving triumph of a deep-sea dive; saffron dawns and cool purple dusks and quivering fierce noons on a coral shore.”

The main object of local color, setting and atmosphere is to create a realistic picture for the benefit of the reader. It is occasionally necessary to exaggerate a little in order to achieve a realistic effect, but this legitimate device must not be confused with inaccuracy of detail. Absurd mistakes about the habits of animals and birds, wrong seasonal appearances of plants and flowers, are points which provide a lusty weapon for the critic. Legal technicalities, historical detail, facts and figures generally, must be handled with great care. Don't, as Dickens did, make a character (Lady Deadlock) walk from Berkeley Square to St. Albans in about two hours.

The golden rule is “verify your references.” Until you are sure of your ground, don't put anything

* *The Pagan (In Dark Places)*.

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of this nature into your story. Carefully check the passing of time. The old-time stage clock which recorded the passing of half an hour while the actors spoke but a few sentences was ridiculous.

Don't send your characters a 100-mile journey by motor car and bring them to their destination in half an hour. Such mistakes are easily made, and to obviate them many writers make a practice of preparing for their own information maps of the locality, plans of the house, and so on. Anyone who cannot visualize a scene clearly should adopt this method.

* * * * *

Intelligent study of the magazines month by month will reveal what kind of stories are in favor with editors. At the present time, for instance, there is a boom in psychic stories, not quite on the lines of the old ghost story, but with a modern dash of the supernatural. Certain types of story are always in demand: detective and mystery stories; adventure stories; sporting stories; and, of course, love stories.

I have noticed among the earliest efforts of many writers a marked tendency towards the morbid or gruesome. Why this should be so I do not know, but it is bad policy. The normal editor prefers "happy" stuff. The gruesome short story, however,

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is a fairly common product. Its stage cousin, the Grand Guignol, made a valiant effort to establish itself in the affections of playgoers, but I fear that it will never appeal to more than a minority. Most people like their theaters and fiction to be bright and happy, in contrast to the deadly monotony of their daily lives.

Ambrose Bierce is probably responsible for the literary school that favors the gruesome short story, but the modern product differs considerably from the Ambrose Bierce stories, which are now "dated."

Of the modern occult and uncanny stories perhaps the best authors to study are Algernon Blackwood, May Sinclair, E. F. Benson, who has lately been specializing in "spook" stories, and, of course, H. G. Wells. Stories with a touch of the supernatural have had a continuous vogue since Poe published his *Ligeia*. One of the best of this kind is W. B. Maxwell's *The Short Cut* (included in *The Great Interruption*), *The Ancient Sin*, by Michael Arlen (*These Charming People*), is a typically modern product on these lines.

Atmosphere is all-important in this type of story and it requires an exceedingly delicate touch to impart it with success. On this account it is a type of story which the inexperienced writer is not advised to tackle.

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Love stories are always popular. The feminine element preponderates in the magazine public and editors are always on the look-out for good romantic stories. This type of story is the pastry of fiction and needs a light and clever touch. Writers whose strong point is dialogue will find this a profitable form. Characterization is important, too, for the reader subconsciously insists upon well-delineated portraits in a story in which human interest runs so high. The physical appearance of the characters must be firmly established, perhaps because the intellectual standard of the public that likes love stories is not very high. The stories of Berta Ruck (whose work is on a much higher literary level than many people suppose), Owen Oliver, Mabel Barnes-Grundy, Ethel M. Dell, Christine Jope-Slade, Muriel Hine, Dorothy Black, W. L. George, A. M. Burrage, May Christie, Kathlyn Rhodes, Winifred Graham and Mrs. C. N. Williamson, provide an excellent index to modern requirements.

Character studies are in a class apart. By this I mean stories which are not really stories in the strict sense of the word but exclusively pen-pictures. They occasionally find their way into the better magazines, but usually with some slight stirring of action to keep the reader's interest alive. In Stacy Aumonier's *The Funny Man's Day*, which is a pathetic study of a

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professional comedian, there is this subdued action movement. A story may be primarily a study of character, yet contain a definite plot interest. Compare Leonard Merrick's *The Portrait of a Coward* (see page 106) and *Ole Fags* by Stacy Aumonier.* But a vignette of character, although fiction, is not properly a story, but a sketch. *Odd Fish* by Stacy Aumonier (illustrated by George Belcher) is a collection of such pen-portraits.

Of all modern authors Stacy Aumonier is the ideal model for the portrayal of character. With a delicate, whimsical, shrewdly humorous touch he depicts an astonishing variety of types. Other authors whose short stories are worth reading for their light on human character are John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, G. K. Chesterton (in the few short stories he has written), Hugh Walpole, E. M. Delafield, Frank Swinnerton, Max Beerbohm, Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, and Frank Norris.

Detective and mystery stories demand a high degree of constructional skill. The plot is the main feature. The whole art of writing mystery stories centers in the ingenious contrivance of the *dénouement*. The more wildly improbable and perplexing the story, the more skill is required in revealing the explanation and making it convincing. The story

* *Miss Bracegirdle and Others.*

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must “march,” and carry the reader’s interest without faltering from start to finish. Read the ingenious stories of Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, R. Austin Freeman, the *Bulldog Drummond* stories of “Sapper” and, of course, the classic Sherlock Holmes series by Sir A. Conan Doyle.

Humorous stories are rare. Anyone who can produce a really funny story — the kind of story that will make the reader laugh aloud — will find editors beaming with friendship. A sense of humor is such an elusive and variable quantity that it is very difficult to know how to cater for it, but if you succeed in alighting on a means of producing laughter-provoking fiction, your chief worry will be income tax. There are two kinds of humorous stories: those which depend for their effect on an ingenious play on words or phrases, riotous burlesque, parody or satire; and those of which the theme and plot are rich in mirth-provoking situations and incidents. Of the two the latter is the rarer bird. Stephen Leacock excels in boisterous satire; William Caine has rapidly come to the front as a genial satirist. Of all English humorists pride of place must be given to W. W. Jacobs, whose night watchman and Bob Pretty stories have a strong hold on the affections of the reading public. His muse has been sadly silent of late. P. G. Wodehouse has attained wide popularity by the crea-

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tion of several humorous types, notably Jeeves, the discreet and resourceful butler; Keble Howard, Bruno Lessing, A. Neil Lyons, Pett Ridge, Saki (H. H. Munro), Barry Pain, A. A. Milne, Edgar Jepson, Denis Mackail with his exploits of "Gibson," and the late Herbert Jenkins with his "Bindle" stories are all well known to the magazine public. The creation of a humorous *type* seems to be the royal road to popular favor. But the demand for good humorous stuff far exceeds the supply.

Sea stories have a wide market. An intimate knowledge of seafaring folk and ways is, of course, a first essential. This is a useful asset, for the vogue of sea stories appears to be permanent. To the stay-at-home citizen a story with a tang of the salt sea is a tonic. Writers who have built up a reputation for this type of story include: Jack London, Frank Bullen, "Bartimeus," Captain Frank H. Shaw, Boyd Cable, Bill Adams, and "Taffrail." Here, again, local color is important. Tales of India, the tropics and the South Seas have a big following. Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Russell, Beatrice Grimshaw, Somerset Maugham, Edmund Snell and H. de Vere Stacpoole have specialized in this branch with marked success. Nature stories are a regular feature of many magazines, and now that F. St. Mars is dead, there seems to be no one but H. Mortimer

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Batten and Charles G. D. Roberts to carry on the good work.

The Irish yarns of George A. Birmingham and Dorothea Conyers, the Jewish-American stories by Bruno Lessing, tales of Chinatown by Thomas Burke, Elinor Mordaunt, and Frank Norris, stories of Africa by Gertrude Page and F. A. M. Webster, the fantastic Chinese creations of Sax Rohmer, and the historical romances of Rafael Sabatini and Marjorie Bowen — to all of these the young writer will turn in his search for good examples of local color. The next best thing to personal experience is the study of local color and atmosphere in the pages of other authors.

The “bread and butter” story deserves mention. A prodigious quantity of cheap fiction is published every week, destined for consumption by schoolboys, errand boys, servant girls, factory girls — in short, the multitude. Most of it serves but one purpose, entertainment. Most of the good people who regard this output with contempt seem to have an idea that it is pernicious trash. It is nothing of the kind. It may not attain a high standard — it doesn’t — but it is what the public want, and on the whole it is wholesome if not elevating. This vast market is often overlooked by the aspiring writer. Anyone with sufficient imagination and energy ought to be able to turn out

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this "bread and butter" fiction. Its requirements are quite simple, and the pattern is readily obtainable at the small news agents' shops round the corner. This type of fiction has well defined limitations as regard theme and plot, but provided you stick to the same kind of plot and characters you will be on the right lines. Don't be afraid to imitate; the public is a conservative one and likes to know what to expect. The stories run to 15,000 words in length and the average rate of payment is only a guinea a thousand, but as no literary polish is required, merely a story with plenty of thrill and incident in it, it does not involve a heavy mental outlay on the part of the author. "Juvenile" stories are always in great demand. Love stories are even more popular.

Once a foothold is secured in this market, editors will often commission stories on synopsis; a summary of the plot, and perhaps the first two or three chapters. To anyone with a fertile imagination and a ready pen this market presents lucrative possibilities. Many writers earn substantial incomes from what is generally regarded as "bread and butter" fiction.

To return to the magazines, the young writer who relies on the plot-interest of his stories is, perhaps, pursuing the wisest course. The magazines of today are filled with stories which are practically nothing but action from start to finish. Stories with plenty

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of excitement and incident undoubtedly appeal to editors. Certain familiar types of story are nothing but action-stories. The problem of local color is reduced to a minimum, but should never be entirely neglected. All short stories require a certain amount of coloring to be convincing. And if there is one reason more than another why MSS. are rejected, it is because they are unconvincing.

The title of your story is a nice problem. It is almost a platitude to say that a good story deserves a good title. If the original inspiration of the story happens to have suggested the title at the same time, well and good. But frequently the writer has to puzzle his brains for an appropriate title after the story is finished. The best advice I can give the young writer is this — DON'T be satisfied with a *fairly good* title. Mediocrity is fatal. Nearly always there is just one title that will fit perfectly. Search diligently for that happy inspiration. Examine the story from every possible angle. When at last the title frames itself in your mind you will say at once, "That's it!" The happy title is always worth hunting for.

The majority of short story titles express human interest. A glance at a random collection of stories will confirm this. Good titles always make a positive contribution to the story even if they only act as a

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kind of literary cement. And the main purpose of the title should not be overlooked: it is to label the story for the reader's benefit. It should be a hall mark of the story's quality. A humorous story should have an appropriate witty title, a story in the grand manner must have a serious, dignified title, and so on.

The title frequently affords an opportunity for humor, a play upon words, alliteration, and other entertaining devices. Titles like *The Widow's Cruise*, *An Arabian Knight*, *The Pimiento Pancakes*, *How to be Happy though Married*, *Ladies in Lavender* are cases in point. As a rule titles should be short, and concrete rather than abstract.

The acid test of a title's merit is its applicability to the general scheme or tone of the story. The student should pass judgment on the titles of all the short stories he reads, and in so doing will be gradually formulating for his own benefit the requirements of a good title. Occasionally he will meet with a title that is a flash of genius, like H. de Vere Stacpoole's title *Did Kressler Kill his Wife?** which cannot be appreciated until the reader reaches the very last line of the story.

* In *Men, Women and Beasts*.

CHAPTER VIII

A SHORT STORY ANALYZED

THE analysis of good short stories on the lines of the specimen which follows is an invaluable exercise to enable the student to appreciate the importance of the architecture of a short story. Every story worth studying should be read twice, the first time in order to test its appeal to one's personal palate, and the second, with a critical, analytical eye, in order to master for oneself the use of those established literary devices which produce certain stock effects. *Cap'en Jollyfax's Gun* should be read first as a story, secondly in conjunction with the marginal notes. A dozen stories dissected in this manner for one's private benefit will yield rich results. Particularly will valuable light be thrown on constructional devices, such as "key sentences." A word of warning is necessary to the young writer who makes use of this exercise; remember, that very often an important effect is obtained not by what is put into a story, but by what is left out.

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CAP'EN JOLLYFAX'S GUN.*

BY ARTHUR MORRISON

The fame of Cap'en Jollyfax's gun spread wide over Thames mouth and the coasts thereabout, in the years before and after the middle of the nineteenth century. The gun was no such important thing to look at, being a little brass cannon short of a yard long, standing in a neat little circle of crushed cockle-shell, with a border of nicely-matched flints, by the side of Cap'en Jollyfax's white flagstaff, before Cap'en Jollyfax's blue front door, on the green ridge that backed the marshes and overlooked the sea. But, small as Cap'en Jollyfax's gun might be to look at, it was most amazingly large to hear; perhaps not so deep and thunderous as loud and angry, with a ringing bang that seemed to tear the ear drums.

Cap'en Jollyfax fired the gun at midnight on Christmas Eve, to start the carollers. Again he fired it at midnight between the old year and the new, to welcome the year; on the ninth of January, because that was the anniversary of Nelson's funeral,

Period and setting.

Effective direct description. "Nicely matched" a clue to Cap'en Jollyfax's character. The gun — really the central figure of the story — is brought first to the reader's notice.

Key sentence "A." (See "B" later.)

Information preparing the reader for the main plot incident.

* Included in *Green Ginger*.

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and on the twenty-eighth, because that was the date of the battle of Aliwal, then a recent victory. He fired it on the Queen's birthday, on Waterloo Day, Trafalgar Day, St. Clement's Day—for Clement was the parish saint—and on the anniversary of the battle of the Nile; and on the fifth of November he fired it at intervals all day long, and as fast as he could clean and load it after dark. He also fired it on his own birthday, on Roboshobery Dove's, Sam Prentice's, old Tom Blyth's, and any other casual birthday he might hear of. He fired it in commemoration of every victory reported during the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, he fired it to celebrate all weddings, some christenings, and once when they hanged a man at Springfield gaol.

Cap'en Jollyfax was a retired master mariner of lusty girth and wide, brilliant countenance. In the intervals between the discharges of his gun, he painted his cottage, his flagstaff, his garden fence and gate, and any other thing that was his on which paint would stay, except the gun, which he kept neatly scoured and polished.

He painted the flagstaff white, the fence green, and the cottage in several

Note “weaving in” of minor characters.

A not of humor in the final sentence of the paragraph.

Character.

Suggestion of indefatigable industry.

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colors; and the abiding mystery of Cap'en Jollyfax's establishment was what ultimately became of the paint. For a new coat succeeded the last very soon after the surface was sufficiently dry, and the consumption of paint was vast; and yet the flagstaff never seemed to grow much thicker, nor did the fence, as a reasonable person would expect, develop into a continuous wall of paint, supported within by a timber skeleton.

Cap'en Jollyfax was a popular man on the whole, though perhaps more particularly so with boys, because of his gun. They would congregate about the fence to watch him clean it and load it, and the happiest of all boys was the one who chanced to be nearest when it was fired, and whose ear was loudest assailed by the rending bang that was so delightful to every boy's senses. Boys dreamed at night of some impossible adventure by the issue whereof the happy dreamer was accorded the reward of permission to fire Cap'en Jollyfax's gun; and one boy at least formed a dark project of hoarding pennies, buying powder, escaping by perilous descent from his bedroom window, and firing Cap'en Jollyfax's gun lawlessly in the depth of night.

Further suggestion of character, with humorous development.

Key paragraph "C." (See "D" later.)

Developing incident.

A Short Story Analyzed

But if the gun enhanced Cap'en Jollyfax's popularity among the boys, its tendency was otherway with the women — those in particular who lived near enough to be startled by its noise. The natural feminine distrust of all guns in all circumstances was increased in the case of a brass cannon, which might go off at any moment of Cap'en Jollyfax's crowded calendar. And it was asserted that Mrs. Billing, the widow, who lived at the hill-foot, exactly under Cap'en Jollyfax's line of fire, had been startled into the destruction of three basins and a large dish within one month of many birthdays. Mrs. Billing indeed, as was to be expected from her situation, was the brass gun's chief enemy. Consequently, if Cap'en Jollyfax had dragged his gun up the aisle of Leigh Church and fired it under the pulpit, he could scarcely have startled the parishioners more than did the rector when he first read the banns of marriage between John Jollyfax, bachelor, and Mary Ann Billing, widow, both of that parish.

Except for the gun, there need have been little to startle Leigh, for Cap'en Jollyfax was none so old, as retired skippers went thereabouts, and Mrs.

Foundation for main crisis.

*Introduction of leading character.
Note skillful
"weaving in."*

Preparation for main crisis.

First minor crisis and plot incident.

Life-simulating description.

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Billing was as neat and pleasant a widow of forty-two as might be found in Essex, where the widows have always been admirable. Moreover, she had no incumbrance in the way of children.

But there was no mistaking the fact now, even for the deaf who were not at church. For the succeeding fortnight and a day or two over, Cap'en Jollyfax and Mrs. Billing were visible, day by day, and arm-in-arm from shop to shop, in Leigh High Street. The result was no great advance in the retail commerce of Leigh — in fact, none. The household appointments of both Cap'en Jollyfax and Mrs. Billing were fairly complete in their humble way; and when Mrs. Billing had triumphantly hauled Cap'en Jollyfax into an ironmonger's in pursuit of a certain fish-kettle or a particular fender, she was certain presently to discover that just such an article embellished Cap'en Jollyfax's kitchen, or her own. Nevertheless, she persevered, for a bout of shopping was the proper preliminary to any respectable wedding, and must be performed with full pomp and circumstance; and if nothing, or very little, was actually bought, so much the cheaper. Mrs. Billing was resolved to be balked of no single circum-

*Beginning of
suspense.*

*Note the human
touch here.*

Local color.

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stance of distinction and triumph appertaining to the occasion. And Cap'en Jollyfax was mightily relieved to find so much shopping cost so little after all; so that he grew gradually more cheerful as the wedding day neared, which is said not to be invariably the case in these circumstances.

Sly humor.

The wedding was fixed for the morning of a certain Wednesday, and on the evening before the day, Mrs. Billing spent some little time in glorious authority on Cap'en Jollyfax's premises, superintending the labor of Mrs. Packwood, who did charing, and was now employed to make the domestic arrangements of the place suit the fancies of its coming mistress. Flushed with hours of undisputed command, Mrs. Billing emerged in the little garden, whereunto Cap'en Jollyfax had retreated early in the operations; and there perceived tomorrow's bridegroom in the act of withdrawing a broom stick from the mouth of the brass gun.

"in glorious authority" — note original turn of phrase.

Plot incident.

"What ha' you been a-doing to that gun, John?" demanded Mrs. Billing, rather peremptorily, eyeing the weapon askant.

Character.

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"A-giving her a rub up inside an' out," answered Cap'en Jollyfax placably. "An' I've just rammed her with a good big charge ready for tomorrow."

"Why for tomorrow?" Mrs. Billing's voice was a trifle sharper still, and she turned a fresh glance of unmistakable dislike on the gun.

"Why for tomorrow?" Cap'en Jollyfax repeated wonderingly. "Why weddin' day, o' course. Touch her off when we come home from church."

"Nothin' o' the sort." She spoke now with a positive snap. "A nasty dangerous banging thing as frightens people out o' their seven senses. I won't hev it. Why, 'twere almost more'n I could stand down there at the bottom o' the hill, an' hev that thing go off near me I will not, so there."

Cap'en Jollyfax stared blankly. "What!" he jerked out, scarce believing his ears, "not fire the gun on the weddin' day?"

"No," Mrs. Billing replied emphatically, "nor any other day, neither. Folk'ud think you were a little boy, a-playing with sich toys; an' I can't abear to be near the thing."

The staring wonder faded gradually

Note compression in the adverb "placably." Note the dialogue struggle for mastery, arousing reader's interest. (The late introduction of dialogue indicates the opening of the main action.)

Beginning of main crisis
"B." (See Key sentence "A.")

Note restraint in use of dialogue.

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from Cap'en Jollyfax's face, and a certain extra redness succeeded it. "I be goin' to fire my own gun on my weddin' day," he said firmly.

*Character
(obstinacy).*

"You ben't nothin' o' the sort," rejoined the widow, no less firmly; "not on my weddin' day. Nayther then nor after, if I'm your wife. Just you take the charge out o' that gun."

Cap'en Jollyfax shook his head, with something like triumph in his eye. "Won't come out 'cept you fire it," he said. "That's the onny way."

*Developing
incident.*

"Very well then, fire it now — not now, but as soon as I be gone. Fire off your gun for the last time tonight, and be done with such foolishness."

"Ben't nothin' to fire it for today," the old sailor returned shortly. "This gun's my department, an' I'm goin' to 'tend to it. I'm goin' to put the tarpaulin over it now, an' tomorrow, Polly, when we're back from church, I'm goin' to fire it."

Character again.

Mrs. Billing bridled. "You're a-goin' to fire that gun before I go to church with 'ee, John Jollyfax, an' not load it agin nayther."

"I'm a-goin' to fire this gun when we're back from church, an' afterwards when proper."

"Cap'en Jollyfax, I ben't goin' to

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church with 'ee till after that gun be fired. So now you know. If you don't fire it tonight you must fire it tomorrow before I turn a step toward church. That's my word on it."

"I'm a-goin to fire my gun when I like," growled Cap'en Jollyfax, dogged and sulky.

"Very well," replied the widow, tossing her head and turning away, "then if you want me to wed 'ee, an' when you want me to wed 'ee, you'll fire it first. Then, maybe, I'll consider of it. But no wife o' yours I'll be till that powder be fired off. An' so good-evenin' to 'ee, Cap'en Jollyfax."

*End of main
crisis.*

That was the beginning of a period of vast interest and excitement in Leigh and its neighborhood. Cap'en Jollyfax's gun remained silent all that night, nor was it fired in the morning.

Suspense.

What Mrs. Billing's feelings were in the matter, whether she sat anxiously listening for the sound of the gun, as some averred, or dismissed the whole subject from her mind, as her subsequent conversation with Mrs. Peck suggested, are secrets I cannot pretend to have penetrated. Cap'en Jollyfax, on his part, consulted deeply in the morning with Roboshobery Dove, and

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evolved a scheme of strategy suited to the physical features of the place. Cap'en Jollyfax, in his best blue coat with brass buttons and his very shiniest hard glazed hat, approached the churchyard and took his seat, in a non-committal sort of way, on the low stone wall that bounded it, with his back toward the church. Roboshobery Dove crouched behind a corner of the same wall, vastly inconvenienced by his wooden leg, but steadily directing his telescope downhill, so that it bore exactly on the door of Mrs. Billing's cottage. It was Roboshobery's duty, as look-out man, to report instantly if Mrs. Billing were seen emerging from the door with her best bonnet on, in which event Cap'en Jollyfax would at once leave the wall and take up his position at the church door to receive her. Failing that, Cap'en Jollyfax would be spared the ignominy of waiting at the church for a bride who never came.

At intervals Cap'en Jollyfax took his pipe from his mouth and roared: "Look-out, ahoy!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the unvarying reply.

"Hev'ee sighted?"

"Nothin' but the door!"

Plot incident.

Note "telescope"
— not field-
glasses.

Character.

Dialogue "in
character"
(nautical).

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Whereat the watch would resume for ten minutes more.

It was three-quarters of an hour past the time fixed, when the rector, himself very punctual, came angrily to the church door, surveyed the small crowd which had gathered, and became aware of Cap'en Jollyfax's strategy.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded of Mrs. Peck, who, in fact, was spying in the interests of the opposite party. "Where's Mrs. Billing?"

Admirable compression here, "who . . . opposite party."

"Mrs. Billing, sir, she say she'll never think o' comin' till Cap'en Jollyfax hev fired the gun."

Intensifies main crisis.

The rector stared at Mrs. Peck for fifteen seconds, passed his fingers once backward and once forward through his hair, and then without a word retired to the vestry.

Plot incident.

Roboshobery Dove maintained his watch, and the little crowd waited patiently till the shadow of the dial over the church porch lay well past twelve o'clock, and the legal time for a wedding was over. Then Cap'en Jollyfax hauled out his silver watch and roared, though Roboshobery Dove was scarce a dozen yards off: "Look-out, ahoy!"

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“Aye, aye, sir!”

“Eight bells.”

With that, Roboshobery Dove hauled out his own watch, banged it, as usual, on the socket of his wooden leg, clapped it against his ear, and then held it before his eyes. Finally, having restored the watch to his breeches-pocket, he shut the telescope, stood erect and rejoined his principal; and the two old sailors stumped off solemnly towards Cap'en Jollyfax's cottage. All that day Cap'en Jollyfax's gun remained silent, and all the next. The day after that was June the first, on which date Cap'en Jollyfax had been wont to fire the gun in celebration of Howe's victory. But this time the Glorious First went unhonored, and it was perceived that Cap'en Jollyfax was mighty stubborn. Monday, the fourth, was Sam Prentice's birthday, but Cap'en Jollyfax's gun stood dumb still.

Leigh had never before listened so eagerly for a bang as it listened now for the report that should publish the submission of Cap'en Jollyfax; but still the report did not come. People took sides, and bets were made. It was observed that Cap'en Jollyfax was grown peevish and morose, that

Plot incident.

Plot incident.

Note compression “should
publish . . .
Cap'en Jolly-
fax.”

Character sug-
gested.

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he shunned his friends and moped at home.

Mrs. Billing, on the other hand, went abroad as always, gay and smiling as ever. Cap'en Jollyfax might do as he pleased, said Mrs. Billing, but she wasn't going to marry him while the charge remained in that gun. If he chose to fire it out — well, she might think the matter over again, but she was none so sure of even that, now.

The days went on, and Cap'en Jollyfax's friends grew concerned for him. He was obstinate enough, but brooding it was plain. Roboshobery Dove, with much ingenuity, sought to convince him that by persisting in his determination he was defeating himself, since there was now an end of gun-fire altogether. Cap'en Jollyfax thought a little over that aspect of the case, but did not fire the gun. It was thought, however, that he could scarce hold out much longer. He was said to have been seen one afternoon stealthily rubbing over the gun and renewing the prime.

A fortnight went, and with June the eighteenth, everybody expected to see an end of the business; for in truth, Waterloo Day would have made the best excuse of the year. But for the

*Summarizing
main crisis.*

Feminine touch.

Action continues.

*Neat disposal of
a point which
would occur to
an intelligent
reader.*

*To camouflage
climax; a legiti-
mate device to
put the reader
off the scent.*

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first time since Cap'en Jollyfax came to the cottage, Waterloo Day passed unsaluted. People wondered and shook their heads; surely it couldn't last much longer? *Suspense.*

And indeed it did not. There was another silent day, and then in the dead of night of the nineteenth, Leigh was startled once more by the bang of Cap'en Jollyfax's gun. Louder and sharper than ever it rang in the still of the night, and folk jumped upright in their beds at the shock. *Action accelerated.*

Heads pushed out from latticed casements in Leigh High Street, and conversation passed between opposite gables. *Plot incident and third (minor) crisis.*

"Did 'ee hear? 'Twere up at Cap'en Jollyfax's!" *Short sentences expressive of excitement.*

"Hear? I'd think so! Cap'en Jollyfax hev fired the gun!"

And so word passed all through Leigh and about on the moment, within house and out of window.

"Cap'en Jollyfax hev fired the gun! Cap'en Jollyfax hev fired the gun!" *Emphasis.*

But, in fact, no sleeper in all Leigh bounced higher in his bed than Cap'en Jollyfax himself; and that for good reason, for the gun was almost under his bedroom window. *Accelerated action.*

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The gun! It was the gun! Somebody had fired it! Those boys — those rascal boys — rascal boys, cheeky boys, plaguey boys, villainous, accursed, infernal boys!

Cap'en Jollyfax fell into a pair of trousers and downstairs in one complicated gymnastic, and burst into the garden under the thin light of a clouded moon. There stood the gun, uncovered, and there by its side lay the tarpaulin — no, not the tarpaulin, it would seem — but a human figure; a woman in a swoon.

Cap'en Jollyfax turned her over and stared close down into her face.

"Why!" he cried, "Polly! Polly! What's this?"

With that her eyes opened. "Be that you, John?" she said. "I den't count 'twould go off that fearful sudden!"

"D." (See Key paragraph "C.")
Real dénouement camouflaged.

Nearing climax (setting "under the thin light of a clouded moon").

CLIMAX

Rapid dénouement and admirable compression into one neatly rounded-off humorous conclusion.

All further explanation superfluous.

CHAPTER IX

THE COMMERCIAL SIDE

NEARLY all the published stories are the work of outside contributors. The free-lance who turns his attention to fiction has every prospect of success, provided his work is good enough. Editors have no interest in rejecting MSS. They welcome acceptable stories. It is a common delusion that the editor "rejects" automatically the work of unknown writers. Influence (which in journalism as in all other walks of life is, I admit, invaluable) may here and there just weigh the scale in favor of a "doubtful" story, and will often secure a quicker verdict on a MS., but generally speaking stories are judged absolutely on their merits. In fact, a good story by an unknown writer is sometimes doubly welcome, because usual rates of payment apply. Editors get tired of paying inflated prices for "big" names.

Inappropriately submitted MSS. cause a vast waste of everyone's time and trouble. Common sense in submitting MSS. is most uncommon. Stories are hastily written and typed out, and submitted in feverish haste to the first magazine that suggests itself. This is, of course, hopelessly wrong. It is

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true that certain short stories are sufficiently typical to be submitted to any one of a dozen magazines, but a little care and reflection would do much to indicate the most likely markets.

Having produced your story, it is a good plan to make up a list of the magazines and papers in the order determined by the likelihood of acceptance. I admit this is a difficult job for the inexperienced writer, but a careful analysis of the magazines month by month is well worth the trouble involved, and saves a tremendous amount of time and disappointment incurred through sending MSS. to magazines for which they are totally unsuitable.

The practical side of authorship should receive earnest attention from all who are anxious to succeed in getting their work into print.

THE PREPARATION OF THE MANUSCRIPT

Nothing annoys an editor more than an untidy, dirty or illegible MS. After all, he is human and the sight of a carelessly submitted MS. is bound to prejudice him unfavorably. No effort should be spared to create as favorable an atmosphere as possible by submitting MSS. which conform to a high standard of neatness and cleanliness. It may seem absurd to refer to dirty MSS., but day after day soiled and grimy documents make their shabby bow on the

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editorial desk, hoping to be “considered favorably.” It is no compliment to the writer’s personal habits, the only alternative explanation being that he hopes the editor won’t notice that the story has been through every other editor’s hands before coming to him — which is worse.

MSS. should be typewritten — double-spaced and on one side of the paper only. No editor likes to read handwriting, however legible it may be. If typewriting is absolutely out of the question, then make as neat a job as possible of it, and briefly explain in a covering note your reason for not having the MS. typewritten. But as a rule, the only satisfactory excuse for handwriting is lack of money. This is about the only serious outlay the writer has to make. Compared with other salesmen he is, in fact, in a very favorable position. His market is within reach of a postage stamp, and his stock-in-trade necessitates but a small outlay in actual cash — pen, ink, paper — and ideas. But at the first opportunity he should most decidedly invest in a typewriter.

A well-typed MS. is the first step towards winning favorable consideration. Cheap and nasty typing is false economy. The size of the paper should be quarto, neither too thin nor too thick. Foolscap is not taboo, but quarto is to be preferred. The title page should contain the following details neatly set out:

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TITLE

Author's Name

Author's name and address (in bottom left-hand corner).

The total number of words (in bottom right-hand corner).

The pages should be numbered consecutively, and fastened by a clip or paper fastener in such a way as to assist convenient reading. Most typewriting concerns bind the story in a stout cover with cord or ribbon; this is really the best way.

A stamped addressed envelope should be enclosed. The stamps should be of sufficient value and the envelope big enough to contain the MS. should it come back to roost. A covering letter is not really necessary, and if included should merely state briefly that you beg to offer the enclosed MS. (quote title, and *nom de plume*, if any). Don't write an explanatory rigmarole, let your story speak for itself. Don't inform the editor it is true to life or founded on fact, because he probably won't believe you, and if he did, would almost certainly turn it down on sight. He wants Fiction, not Facts. (To a fiction editor, facts spell libel actions.)

Don't mention that it's your first effort — *that* won't improve your prospects.

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Don't tell the editor you are starving and if he doesn't accept your story you will commit suicide; he isn't interested. Don't tell him how much you enjoy his magazine; you're a salesman now, not a flattering reader.

Don't insist on an immediate decision; that's the way to put the editorial back up. If you have published work to your credit there is no harm in mentioning it, but don't overload the letter with details of your accomplishments. Your story will be judged on its merits.

Address the MS. to "The Editor." Don't try and find out his name; if he doesn't know you he may resent it.

If possible, avoid folding the MS., especially if it is of a considerable length; pack it flat, never roll it.

Don't call on the editor unless you are actually negotiating with him. A personal interview — even if you obtain one — will not further the cause of your MS. But if an editor writes expressing interest in your work and inviting you to call, don't hesitate to do so, for he may be able to give you some valuable advice, and an indication perhaps of the kind of work he wants.

If an editor accepts one of your stories, don't immediately bombard him with everything you have ever written.

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Never write long letters to editors. They have a lot of work to get through. In fact, most amateurs do not realize what an enormous amount of money is spent annually in the form of editorial time in reading unsolicited MSS. Supposing magazines charged a small fee for reading every story submitted! And yet in one way it would be quite reasonable to do so; every MS. you submit costs them money. Yet so anxious are editors to obtain good "stuff" that they cheerfully wade daily through a huge pile of MSS. in the hope of discovering one or two that are suitable material for their pages.

Don't ask for a personal criticism of your story. Editors are too busy to tell you what is wrong with it, and it is no part of their function to instruct beginners.

Never submit the same MS. to more than one magazine at the same time. This is not "cricket." Besides, you are in an awkward position if by any chance both accept it.

Don't be impatient for a decision; editors hate being worried. Allow a reasonable time to elapse, say three weeks or even longer. Then, if you must, write a brief polite note, mentioning the date on which the MS. was submitted, and venturing to ask his decision.

If your MS. comes back — and at first they

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usually do — don't write the editor a sarcastic or plaintive letter — he won't read it. Send it somewhere else. If the MS. begins to look worn or travel-stained, replace the title-page with a fresh one.

Always keep a note of where you have sent your MSS., and the dates; if you have a large number out it is advisable to keep a card index.

If the story gets mislaid or lost, don't write threatening litigation; the editor is probably covered by a published warning that he cannot hold himself responsible for the safety of MSS. In your own interest, keep a copy of your stories.

Don't send a story to a magazine or periodical with which you are not familiar. It is sheer waste of time submitting the kind of story which is alien to the general spirit of the magazine. As a rule, the editor of a fiction magazine aims at catering for all tastes by publishing every month a variety of stories. Therefore examine the proportion of love stories, adventure stories, sea stories, nature stories, etc., which appear in the pages of the different magazines, and decide which hold out the best prospects for the MS. in question. Don't send a sentimental love story to the *Black Mask*; nor a tale of the wild and woolly west to *Snappy Stories*, unless, of course, it has a strong love interest.

Don't accuse the harassed editor of not reading

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your MS. An old lady once tried to catch an editor out by sticking down the corners of two pages of the story. When she got the story back they were still stuck down. Triumphant, she wrote and pointed out that her story could never have been properly read. The editor replied:

“DEAR MADAM,

“If you will separate the two pages in question, you will find that I have taken the liberty of pencilling my initials in the corner.”

Don't submit your MSS. indiscriminately. Study your market carefully. One magazine's meat is another's poison.

Make a list of magazines or papers in the order of “probability” and send the MS. to each in turn.

Don't submit Christmas ghost stories in June, nor in *December*; the right time is about August, when the October magazines are going to press. Similarly, baseball and tennis stories should be sent in March or April.

If you are a raw recruit, be content to accept ordinary rates of payment. If a magazine makes you an offer for a story, work out how much it is per thousand words, and if it is not less than \$15.00 per thousand, accept it. In order to get into print, it is sometimes expedient to accept less from the cheaper

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weekly fiction papers. But a magazine of any standing ought to pay at least \$15.00 per thousand. The majority pay more. No reputable magazine will publish a story without payment to the author. Remember, in the interests of writers generally, that “a thing that’s worth printing is worth paying for.”

It is generally understood that the offer of a MS. to an American magazine comprises the first American Serial Rights only. If, however, you get a good offer for the copyright of a story, accept it. Disposing of the first American Serial Rights only leaves you free to negotiate the British and foreign rights, dramatic and film rights. The American market is, of course, much superior to the English. Prices run very much higher. Twenty pounds is a good price for an English magazine to pay for a story of ordinary length — say four thousand words — in the American market the same story may fetch five hundred dollars or more. \$1,000 is not a big price for a short story; Irvin S. Cobb is paid \$2,500 for nearly every story he writes! But the beginner should not neglect the English magazines; provided stories are not too American in outlook and expression, English editors are keen to buy from America. The American standard is generally higher than the British, and as a rule only the “big” English names — Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Rafael Sabatini,

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Stacy Aumonier, Cosmo Hamilton, Sir Philip Gibbs, W. J. Locke, Robert Hichens — are featured in the best American magazines.

The question of illustrations seldom affects the author. The editor buys the story and sends it to the artist for illustration. The writer has no say in the matter. Sometimes author and artist will collaborate and submit their joint efforts; but this is very unusual, and the plan is certainly not recommended to unknown writers. It is interfering with the editor's province.

Why not a literary agent? The majority of successful authors dispose of their work through agents. The plan has several advantages; by leaving the business side to an agent the author is free to concentrate on his output without the harassing and depressing interruption of rejection slips; many writers, too, feel that they are incapable of handling the business side. Again, it is probably true that agents secure better terms than the writer can himself. In the case of comparatively unknown authors, the agent's imprint (if it is a reputable one) will often secure a prompt reading, and perhaps even a more favorable consideration than if the MS. came direct from the author. The agent claims to specialize in editorial requirements, and by keeping in daily touch with the different markets to know more accurately than the

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writer what the state of the market is, what types of story are in demand, what magazines are “full up,” and so on. On the whole, the literary agent system is a sound one, and the service rendered is well worth the fees charged. The agent’s commission naturally varies, but ten to fifteen per cent on prices accepted (subject to the approval of the author) is usual.

The number of reputable agents is not large, and the young writer should be warned against dealings with so-called literary agents who invite aspiring authors to send them MSS. and then offer to dispose of their work provided they pay substantial “reading fees.” In the first place, no reputable agents will handle a writer’s work unless they are satisfied that it is of a sufficiently high standard. Some agents make a nominal charge to read and criticize if necessary the work of a writer unknown to them, but this charge is always a nominal one. The leading literary agents will not undertake to handle work that in their judgment is unlikely to find a market.

As a general rule, it is not advisable for the beginner to worry about an agent. There is plenty of time for that when he begins to climb the literary ladder, and the business side becomes an important question. Not until a dozen or so stories have been published should the writer — in average circumstances — approach an agent.

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A final word. Let no young writer be discouraged by rejection slips. In the first three years of his literary career, W. L. George collected 723!

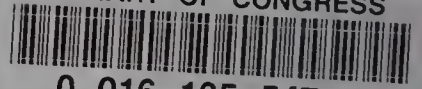
As Ernest Raymond, author of *Tell England* and *Damascus Gate*, has said:

“There is only one message to the literary aspirant, and it is, ‘Forge on through a sea of rejection slips, and you will get there in the morning’! It may take three years, it may take six; and it may take nine, but if you don’t arrive with drums on the ninth, you’ll arrive with thunder in the tenth.

“I opened my bombardment when I was about seventeen years old: and the blasted Hindenburg Line didn’t fall till I was thirty-two. The outer system to be carried was a literary agent of high standing; he succumbed in due course. From this vantage point we bombarded the publishers for over a year; and, at last, that tough and sombre system fell. Then the publishers turned their heavy artillery on the public, and the last defences went up in smoke. Thereafter, naught remained but to walk in and possess the promised land. And it’s a land worth fighting for: many of its paths are plenteousness, and all its ways are joy.”

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